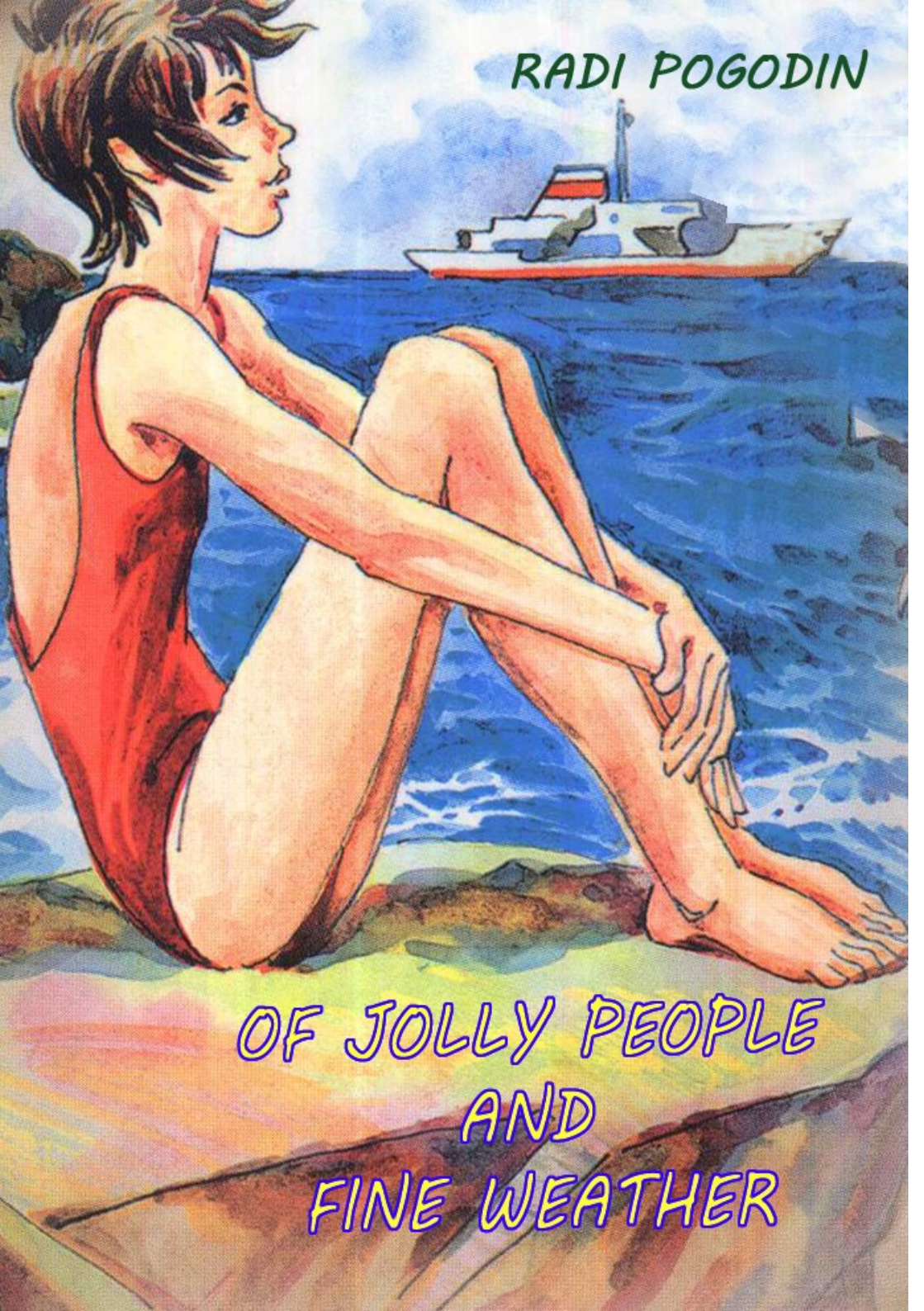
RADI POGODIN



OF JOLLY PEOPLE AND FINE WEATHER

RADI POGODIN

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Р. Погодин
РАССКАЗЫ О ВЕСЕЛЫХ ЛЮДЯХ И ХОРОШЕЙ ПОГОДЕ
На английском языке

Translated from the Russian by Raissa Bobrova
Edited by Natalie Ward

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PEACE AND QUIET

The cabin stood all by itself, right near the forest. It was quite small and had no porch. The walls were made of thick logs grown grey with time. The chinks between them were stopped with moss. A thick oaken slab lay on the ground before the door. It was old too, with coltsfoot growing in the cracks. The house consisted of just one room. Filled with furniture, it would seem no larger than a match-box. But now it was empty and spacious. The only furniture was two bright-red mattresses lying one on top of the other in the corner.

All through the winter Kirill and Andrei had dreamed about a holiday in some quiet place where they could hear the grass growing, the worms boring into the earth and the sunrays rubbing against each other.

"How quiet it is," said Andrei.

"Lovely," responded Kirill. "Easy on the ears."

Five paces away the forest began, firs in their prickly coats, brawny pines and birches in pinkish-white silk. An artless brook bursting forth from the depths of the earth, babbled away the hidden secrets of the underground in a whisper and dived into the tall grass, stunned by the quiet and blinded by the sun.

Kirill was an artist. He had brought along paints, canvas and cardboard. Anatoly was an archaeologist. He had a suitcase full of books, thick and thin, on archaeology. That was all the

luggage they had, not counting a knapsack with provisions.

Kirill and Anatoly wandered round the house chewing grassblades (all townsfolk chew grassblades), sprinkled some water from the brook on their heads and then lay down under the trees.

The silence around, soft and gentle, seemed to be stroking their ears with a warm feather-puff.

Anatoly raised his hand, made a snatching movement as though catching a mosquito and brought his fist near Kirill's ear.

"Can you hear it? "

"What? "

"The silence. It's soft and fluffy."

Anatoly smiled and unclenched his fist.

"I'm hungry," said Kirill. He gazed thoughtfully at the old logs and the black shingle roof. "You know, there's something missing in our house."

"What? "

"I don't know. Let's go in and look."

They entered the house. The warm floorboards glistened as though varnished. A fat bumble-bee circled over their knapsack.

"I know," Kirill said. "We have no stove."

Anatoly lay down on the floor, squinted behind his glasses and filled his chest with air. His chest was flat and pale, with sticking-out ribs, and it looked like two washing boards stood upright one against the other.

"We don't need one. What's in a stove! "

"And where are we going to cook our meals? "

"We'll eat sandwiches."

"I can't," said Kirill. "I have an ulcer."

"Then let's make ourselves a hearth outside. Out of huge boulders." Anatoly pulled a packet of biscuits out of the knapsack and went on animatedly, warming to his subject, "The hearth is the beginning of all civilisation. The basic principle of culture. It is the centre of everything...."

When he had finished the last biscuit, he said with a sigh of regret "Let's not bother with meals. It's a shame to spoil the house."

"A house without a stove is a barn," the artist said stubbornly.

Anatoly took in another chestful of forest air and closed his eyes blissfully.

"The air here is fit to eat...."

"Sure," Kirill assented. "Let's go and see the chairman: we must have a stove."

They walked to the village through a field of yellow wheat, over islands of goose-grass, past cornflowers and daisies. The swallows perched on the telegraph wires were shaking their tails comically. Their feet probably itched from the current but they were too lazy to fly about on such a hot day.

All was quiet in the village too. The people were out in the fields working. Only the kolkhoz chairman's voice could be heard gurgling and wheezing through the window of the farm office like in a loudspeaker:

"You'll have to manage. I've only one tractor here. It's out silaging."

He greeted the newcomers with a wave of the receiver.

"Brought the rent? Come on in."

A girl sat at a small desk heaped with all kinds of registers, invoices, bills and report-sheets. She was busy chasing the beads of her abacus right and left.

"Did you like the house? You'll be fine there. The structure's no good for the farm and so I equipped it for holiday-makers. Sima, take the rent from these comrades."

The girl pushed the abacus aside.

"There's no stove," Kirill said.

"What d'you say? "

"There's no stove."

The chairman wiped his neck with a handkerchief. The girl fanned herself with a sheet of paper. They did not seem to understand what it was all about.

"Isn't it warm enough? " the chairman said.

"It's not that," said Kirill. "You're asking us to pay rent for a barn—because that's what a house without a stove is, a barn. How are we going to cook our meals? "

The chairman gave a pained grimace.

"What meals? Who could eat in this heat? "

"I have a stomach ulcer," Kirill said, "I must have hot meals."

The door flew open with a thunderous bang. A burly young fellow dragged a boy into the office.

The girl smoothed her permed hair hastily and propped her plump cheek with a fist.

The burly fellow shook the boy lustily, like a dog worrying a partridge.

"Got him! " he roared. "Nabbed him at last! "

"Let me go," protested the boy.

The office filled with noise became jollier and cooler.

The burly fellow pushed the boy onto a stool.

"The plague! It's the fifth time I have to chase him off the tractor! "

"Tone it down, will you? Yelling like a bear with a sore head! " the boy retorted, unabashed, and pushed his vest into his shorts.

"What the hell do you want on the tractor? " the burly fellow roared again. His voice was like an avalanche, you wanted to jump out of its way. But the boy retorted with spunk.

"You're always hanging round the milkmaids. And the tractor stands idle."

The girl snatched the abacus, and the beads started dashing back and forth, counting off rubles, thousands and even millions.

The burly fellow was taken aback.

"Sima, he's lying! " He hit himself on the chest with his fist. "Honest to goodness, it's a lie. I only asked for a drink of milk."

The boy curled his mouth leftwards and squinted rightwards, the manoeuvre making his face look like a corkscrew.

"Call that a drink," he scoffed. "You could get through three milk-churns in the time you spent larking about with the milkmaids."

The beads on the abacus all but shot sparks.

"It's a pack of lies, Sima! " the burly fellow roared piteously.

The girl raised her head slowly. Her face was haughty and she did not give the fellow as much as a glance.

"Shall I sent the reports to the district? " she asked the chairman.

"I can't wait to see you conscripted, Ivan," said the chairman. "Go and get on with the silaging. If I hear about the tractor standing idle again, I'll demote you to a trailer-hand."

"All I did was take a drink...."

The burly fellow shook a fist the size of a cabbage at the boy. The latter jerked his shoulder fearlessly. "I didn't drag you down here. Klava chased you off the dairy-farm, so you decided to take it out on me. "

The abacus gave off a machine-gun burst. The burly fellow made a despairing gesture and dashed out. The chairman came up to the boy and squeezed his ear between his fingers. The boy looked up at him and said, wincing:

"Not before strangers, please."

The chairman pushed his hand into his pocket.

"Okay, I'll let it pass. I have to hurry out to the fields now. Tell your father to put some hot coals into your pants for me."

"What about the stove? " asked Kirill. "Will somebody build us a stove? "

"No they won't," retorted the chairman flinging the door open and pointing to a row of new weatherboard houses with slate roofing in a pattern of white and red squares. "None of them houses has a stove. People come to the kolkhoz and they need housing, but we have only one stove-builder."

"By the way, he's gone off to town to earn some money on the side," the girl said. "I saw him leave yesterday."

"Has he? I'll sew his ears to his eyebrows! " the chairman thundered and slammed his fist into a book-case. Then he said to Kirill: "We'll give you some furniture.... A stool."

* * *

They boiled the kettle on a camp-fire, sat for a while listening to the forest settling down for the night and then dropped off to sleep themselves on their bright-red fragrant mattresses.

In the morning Anatoly was the first to open his eyes. Yesterday's boy was sitting in the middle of the room on a stool, leafing through a book with an occasional sniff. One of his feet was bare, the other was shed in a galosh tied on with a string. A straw had got stuck between the toes of the bare foot.

"Pleased to see you," Anatoly said. "You have broken into a house without knocking. That makes you a Viking."

The boy rose and closed the book carefully.

"Good morning. Didn't you want a stove built? "

"Sure thing," Kirill joined in with animation. "We still do. Is the stove-builder your father? He's back, is he? "

The boy gave Kirill a pitying glance, produced a piece of string from his pocket and began measuring the walls.

"Lots of room. Just right for a Russian stove."

"Can't we have a smaller one? " Anatoly asked glumly.

"Sure. What kind? "

"What kind are there? "

The boy whistled through a hollow tooth and then rattled off:

"There are the Russian stoves, to bake bread in. Then Dutch stoves, for warmth. The pot-bellied fancy kind. Then there are the makeshift ones...."

"We want a stove we could cook in," Anatoly said decisively and made for the door. "My friend here likes hot meals."

"The best thing for cooking is a range."

Kirill did not like the idea.

"A range won't do. We're going to stay here until autumn. The nights are cold in autumn. You can see for yourself my friend hasn't much flesh on his bones.

He has no resistance to the cold, he catches a chill at the slightest provocation. We must have something that will do for both."

"If you want it to do for both then what you need is the universal stove," the boy concluded. He pulled out his string again, measured out the floor and chalked a cross in the middle of the room.

"We'll put it up here.... But perhaps you'll have a Russian stove after all, so that you could bake bread in it. You might need bread in autumn."

"Whatever for? We can buy bread in the shop."

The boy scratched his shaggy head.

"Just as you like. I thought perhaps you'd like to bake your own bread. Now, if the shop sold old

Auntie Tatiana's bread, it would be a different matter. Her bread is quite something. Only folks from the repair shops buy bread at the shop."

There was a crashing noise outside.

"Why the hell did you barricade the door with this junk here?" Anatoly yelled.

"They're pails. To bring clay and sand in," the boy replied, unperturbed. "You'll have to bring a lot of clay."

Anatoly re-entered the house and put his spectacles on.

"What d'you mean we'll have to bring it? What about you? "

"I have other things to attend to. It's always the customers who do the accessory work. Otherwise we won't get it done in a week."

The boy took them to the river.

"You'll get the sand from here," he said pointing to a high bank. "Come along, I'll show you where the clay is."

He walked on along the riverbank. Anatoly touched the water in the river.

"I thought we'd come here for a rest? "

"Why? " said Kirill with a grin. "Pails too heavy for you? Want me to carry yours too? "

Anatoly clanged his pails in exasperation and ran after the boy.

The latter had stopped in a hollow overgrown with willow bushes. The branches dipped into the water as though drinking, unable to slake their thirst. The dry, sharp sedge-grass rustled underfoot. The boy's legs were covered with whitish scratches. Against them Kirill's and

Anatoly's legs looked disgustingly pale, which gave them a sickly feeling of inferiority.

"Ours used to be a village of potters," the boy told them with sedate dignity. "They took their pots to the fair. The clay here is first-rate. You should hear our pottery ring."

He threw the shovel into the hole.

"We'll dig it here. Then we'll go somewhere else to get the gravel."

Anatoly picked up the spade and began digging carefully, as though at an excavation.

"What do you want gravel for? " Kirill asked, picking up a lump of clay and kneading it with his fingers.

"It's for the foundation. When they installed the generator at the power station I helped Uncle Maxim to make the foundation. The gravel strengthens the cement. Hey! " he suddenly shouted. "That's no way to dig clay! " He took the shovel from Anatoly, drove it in with a shove of his foot, lifted a big chunk of clay, dashed it into the pail and said: "That's how you do it."

"Don't shout at him," said Kirill with a laugh. "He's come here to rest. His health is weak." And he showed the boy a comic little devil he had made out of the lump of clay.

"Go on with you," the boy said disdainfully and walked off, through the bushes, towards the village.

Anatoly looked after him resentfully.

"Teaching me, an archaeologist, how to dig! "

"Why not? " chuckled Kirill. He fingered his little devil and tossed it into the bushes.

It was not so very difficult to climb the sandy bank the first time, even dragging two pails full of damp clay. The second time was harder. The third....

Kirill heaved the pails up in front of him, then pulled his feet up, holding onto the pails. He had nearly reached the top. There was a pine growing on the rise. The sand had long trickled away from between its roots. The pine spread its branches wide, as though expecting the cliff to fall eventually down into the river. Kirill took another step up. The sand started to slide from under his feet. Kirill let go off the pails and clutched at the pine's roots.

"Watch out! " he shouted to Anatoly.

It's no easy matter to watch out when your feet are planted in sliding sand and trembling with the strain to boot. Kirill's pails hurtled past Anatoly, just missing him, and knocked his own pails out of his hands. The four pails rolled down and came to rest by the water's edge. The four pails lay below, each weighing a ton.

Anatoly crawled up to Kirill and sat down beside him.

"Let's do a bunk, shall we? Drop the entire thing and sneak out into the forest? "

"I can't, I have an ulcer," Kirill answered wistfully.

They thought up another way of carrying the pails, slinging them onto a pole and carrying the pole on their shoulders. Not that it made the going any easier, what with the pails swinging wildly about all the time.

The piles of sand and clay in front of their house grew all too slowly. They had to make ten trips to the riverbank.

When they were bringing up the tenth and last batch, somebody right overhead shouted, "Whoa there! "

Kirill and Anatoly stopped in their tracks.

"It's the limit," said Anatoly resentfully. "Working us like blacks and making fun of us into the bargain."

"Whoa! " came another angry shout, and the boy drove out from behind some bushes/ He was standing upright in a cart that looked like a box and shouting at a bay mare. The horse nibbled now at the grass, now at the leaves on the bushes like a choosy guest who was not hungry but wanted a taste of every dish on the table.

"Climb in and let's get going," he said. "Hey you, stop that!"

"Where must we go now? "

"Go on, climb in, they only let me have the horse for a couple of hours."

The cart jolted along a dirt track. Now and again the boy urged on the spry mare. Kirill and Anatoly clung for dear life to the sides of the cart.

Heavy dust splashed under the horse's hooves and billowed away from the wheels.

"Now's the time to rest, Anatoly! Gaze your fill at the blue sky and the pretty flowers."

Anatoly was about to make a rejoinder on the subject of the sky, but the cart gave a particularly vicious jolt and his head hit the driver's back.

The boy reined in the horse.

There were fields and copses around them. They were on a hill by the ruins of an old church. The cupola lay nearby looking like the skeleton of a ship tossed onto the shore by a storm.

"There used to be a big village here," the boy said. "The nazis burned it down in the war. And they blew up the church too. It was a good church. Could have done for a cinema."

The boy jumped off the cart, came up to the sagging remains of a wall and knocked on it with a fist.

"You don't happen to know what kind of lime they used in the old days, do you? It looks to me it was pretty strong lime."

Anatoly explained how the builders of old soaked the lime for several years. They built slowly and the cost was high. "But then it stood for a long time."

The boy began to clear the cart of the bedding of straw he had put there to make it more comfortable for Kirill and Anatoly.

"Last year I helped them to build the water-tower at the repair shop. Well, it cracked across this summer. Haven't they invented something to make it both quick and strong? "

"Of course they have," Anatoly answered. "There's such a lot of construction going on in the country, and you say they can't build to last."

"I never said it," muttered the boy. "Come on, let's load the bricks on."

Kirill and Anatoly tried to select the bigger fragments. Sometimes they even found whole bricks. They were soon smeared with brick dust, and their hands were covered with scratches.

'"That'll do," the boy finally commanded. "A horse is not a tractor. You'll make another trip on your own. Only don't you show yourselves in the village. I told the chairman you needed the cart to collect your luggage at the station. Well, I'll be off."

"Where're you off to? " Anatoly shouted.

"I have things to see to," answered the boy imperturbably.

Kirill and Anatoly were unloading the third cartful and about to start on the fourth trip when the boy came along with a roll of wiring, several old sheets of iron and some rusty grate-bars.

"There," he said with satisfaction. "Nikita gave me the iron sheets. He's the driver and I helped him to reassemble his carburettor in spring. Uncle Egor the smith gave me the bars. Last autumn I helped him to repair the rakes. And the wiring comes from Sergei the electrician. I helped him to stretch it up this morning."

"You haven't been helping the chairman to run the farm by any chance? " Anatoly inquired innocently.

"I can't. I'd need a motorcycle for that," the boy answered wistfully. When the sarcasm of the question sank in, he frowned and said sternly:

"You'll have to sort the bricks out. The little bits in one heap, the halves in another and whole bricks in a third."

Kirill and Anatoly set about sorting the bricks.

The boy watched them for a few moments, then took the shovel and, without another word, started digging a pit.

When the pit was deep enough, he issued another command: "Bring me water! "

Anatoly snatched the pails.

"See you don't trip up! " Kirill shouted after him.

He had to make the next trip for water himself, though. Then it was Anatoly's turn again. Then Kirill shovelled the sand down into the pit and Anatoly shovelled the clay. They took turns at pouring water down while the boy mixed the mortar.

"See? That's how it's done. Now you do it. See that there are no lumps." He gave the shovel to Anatoly and went off into the house where he started measuring the floor all over again.

Towards evening, when the only way Kirill and Anatoly were able to stand upright was by holding onto the shovel which had got stuck in the mortar the boy finally gave the signal to knock off:

"That'll do for today. You can rest now. Tomorrow we'll start building it. Goodbye." He picked up the reins and led the horse off.

"Goodbye," said Kirill.

"What wouldn't I give for a jug of milk," Anatoly groaned.

They waited for the squeaking of the wheels to die down and started for the village.

They wandered a long time about the streets in search of a likely-looking house for milk. At last they chose a tall cottage with net curtains and tapped on the window.

An old woman looked out. She had a mouthful of white teeth. The wrinkles on her cheeks kept moving like ripples driven by the breeze.

"Goodness me, you look dead-beat! " she exclaimed and the wrinkles ran up her forehead.

"Could you sell us some milk? " Anatoly asked, leaning limply against the wall.

"And some fresh cucumbers," added Kirill.

"Of course, right away.... I'll bring you some hot potatoes, too." The old woman disappeared inside.

Opposite her house, across the street, a new house was being built. Two men were putting the topmost row of logs in position. One was an old man with a three days' beard and a moustache which looked like two tooth brushes, the other was a boy in a faded vest.

Anatoly coughed nervously.

"The Viking...."

"The same," Kirill assented.

The boy had also noticed them. He straightened up on the wall and waved to them.

"Hey, come over here, there's something I want to tell you!"

Anatoly dashed into the bushes. Kirill threw a hungry and sad look at the old woman's window and followed suit.

"Hey, come back! " the boy yelled.

The old woman poked her head out of the window.

"Here's milk," she said. "And the potatoes...."

Kirill and Anatoly raced for their cabin. When they reached it, they flopped down on their mattresses without even any tea.

They tossed about all night. Their bones ached, their muscles were sore and twitched as though electric current was being passed through them. They listened to the drone of the old pines, suffering from insomnia in their old age, and to the babble of the dozing young bushes in the undergrowth. The tired blood thumped in their temples. Kirill dreamed of huge brick hills, each the size of Mt. Kazbek, of pipes of all sizes, of water-towers, telegraph poles, stoves, blast furnaces and sky-scrapers. And over it all towered the boy, moving his lips soundlessly and trying to measure the whole world with his length of string.

The morning flowed down the window-sills in streams of sunlight. A warm draught stirred their hair. A sparrow was sitting on the window-sill. He gave the sill a peck or two, chirped satedly and stared with his pin-point eyes at the two sleepers.

Kirill stirred, opened his eyes and closed them again at once.

The boy was sitting on the stool in the middle of the room and leafing through a book.

"Good morning," he said.

Anatoly opened his eyes too.

"Not already? " he groaned.

The boy poked his finger into the page.

"Valuable books, these. To think there's all those dwellings buried in the ground. The way I see it, the first thing man ever did was build houses." The boy glanced at the heap of bricks near the threshold and the roofs of the village in the distance. "So the building profession must be the oldest of all. It began before all others. All

those cobblers and tailors came later. Even sowing and reaping started later...."

"Well," Anatoly mumbled. "I believe you're right."

For the first time in those three days he gave the boy a look of interest and then rose with a lot of grunting and groaning.

"Have you got an ulcer too? " the boy asked and warned him hurriedly. "Put on your glasses or you'll trip up again! "

A frame knocked together of rough boards lay in the middle of the floor.

"What have you brought this thing for? " Kirill asked in a disgruntled voice. "Want to build a chicken-coop in addition to the stove? "

"It's a planking frame, to make sure that the size is right," the boy explained. "I knocked it together this morning. Matvei Stepanich let me have the planks. He's the carpenters' team-leader."

Kirill sat up, draped in his sheet.

"Yes, I know, you helped him to put up the office."

"You and your jokes! " The boy put the book down and rose. "You've seen our office. It's made of bricks. No, I worked with him in the cattle-yard. All our boys did. Now they are out hay-making."

"Why aren't you with them? "

"It's because of my foot. I can't walk much."

Kirill wrapped himself tighter in his sheet. For some reason the splendid morning held no promise of joy for him. He kept wincing, stretching out his neck and jerking his chin.

"And where did you hurt your foot? In an air crash, I suppose? "

"You and your jokes! " the boy said again. "We were playing football and I ran into some broken glass." He walked into a corner, unwrapped a paper parcel and produced a hammer, a trowel and some spikes and nails.

"Why did you run away yesterday? I wanted to give you some spikes."

Kirill started picking himself up painfully.

"Will you let us have a bite first, or do we run off for water at once? " Anatoly asked. "Or for the bricks? "

"Sure you can have a bite," the boy said magnanimously, set the frame according to the chalked marks he had made the day before and fixed it into position with iron spikes. "Hungry men make poor workers. I've brought you a jug of milk."

Anatoly took the cool jug and started drinking. Kirill limped over to him.

"Leave me some, hey! "

"You can have tea. Milk is bad for ulcer." Anatoly pushed him lightly aside and turned to the boy. "Why don't you have some too? "

"I'm not hungry. I had some pancakes with cream in the morning." The boy drove in the last spike. "When you have the stove, you can bake yourselves pancakes too."

"I say, give me some milk," Kirill said plaintively.

Anatoly passed him the jug.

"Well, foreman, tell us what to do."

"Oh, there's plenty to do," the boy said, smiling for the first time since they came to know him. "There's bricks to be carried in, the mortar to be mixed. Lots of work."

Kirill finished the milk, bent down to put the jug on the floor in the corner and clutched at the small of his back with a groan: "Ouch! I'm beginning to think sandwiches would be preferable to this."

They worked stripped to their shorts. Kirill and Anatoly carried water and mixed the mortar. When the stove had risen to the boy's waist, he put the trowel aside and set to pondering something, then lay down on the floor, produced a pencil stub and a rumpled sheet of paper from his pocket and started drawing on it.

Kirill and Anatoly squatted beside him.

The boy drew lines on the paper, scratched the back of his head, sighed, and drew more lines. Suddenly he asked: "How much do you earn? "

Kirill and Anatoly exchanged glances. Kirill flicked his under lip meaningfully. Anatoly put out his cigarette by the simple device of thrusting it into the mortar.

"Some people earn a lot, but are so very careful with their money. I'd even say mean," the boy said.

"Oh, so that's why you've stopped working! Don't worry, we'll pay you well."

The boy lowered his head and tied the string on his galosh tighter.

"It's not that," he muttered. "I don't want any money. I'm doing it for the fun of it." He sidled to his clients. "If you earn a lot, why not make it an

electric stove? There'll be no soot, and you won't have any bother with the firewood."

The boy rose and walked up to the stove.

"All you'd want is an element and a regulator. Of course it consumes a lot of electricity. Sergei and I once made a stove like that for the incubator. But if you earn a lot..."

"Look, forget about your electric stove. Just get on with what you have started," Anatoly interrupted.

"Sure I'll get on. All I said is that it would be more fun. I don't want any of your money." He blinked his white eyelashes a few times and made for the door.

"Hey, where are you going? " Kirill shouted after him.

The boy gave no answer. The door shut firmly behind him.

It became very quiet. The pail that stood on the wall of the stove leaked a little and the dripping sound was the only thing that broke the silence.

Anatoly rose, scooped up some mortar from the pail, slapped it on the corner and put a brick in place.

"Now we've gone and hurt his feelings," he said. "Why did you have to shout at him? "

"I never shouted at him. It's you who have been making fun of him these two days. You're no judge of character."

"Don't tell me you are." Anatoly laid another brick. "Let's go after him. Explain to him that we did not mean it like that."

They rushed out of the house. Kirill shouted: "Hey, boy! "

There was no answer.

"Hey! " Kirill shouted again. "I say, what's his name? "

"The Viking," Anatoly answered in confusion.

Of course it was a simple matter to find such a striking character in the village. Anybody was sure to tell them.

By the dairy-farm they met a covey of milkmaids in white smocks.

"Excuse me," Anatoly addressed them, "can you tell us where the boy lives? "

"Which boy? " a pretty girl with dimples in her cheeks asked him.

"Well...."

"A faded vest and old shorts," Kirill supplied the verbal portrait. "A nose like a fig.... Mop of a head."

The girl laughed.

"They're all like that here. We have no time to cut their hair just now. We shear them with the sheep, in spring."

The other milkmaids laughed too.

"You won't be needing any girls by any chance? "

Jostling, they went indoors.

"He has a galosh tied with a string on one foot," Kirill shouted after them. A peal of laughter was all the response he got.

Kirill and Anatoly started on a round of the streets. After all, there weren't many streets in this village, one or two, at the very most three.

"Townsfolk, cultured people, if you please," fumed Anatoly. "Never asked him what his name was. What a disgrace! "

A tractor was standing opposite the farm office, its engine purring and snorting. A tip-up cart with a huge load of hay was hitched onto it. A goat was standing on its hind legs, nibbling at the hay. The tractor-driver and the girl-clerk stood on the porch.

The sight of the tractor-driver gave Anatoly and Kirill new hope.

"I say, that boy, remember.... Where does he live? " Anatoly asked. "Remember him? "

"Don't I? " the burly fellow growled fiercely. "That plague lives in that there house. His name is Grishka."

"Thank you," said Kirill, and the two of them started for the house indicated. The tractor-driver called after them. "Hey, he's not there now! He's at old Auntie Tatiana's! "

Auntie Tatiana's proved to be the very same house where Kirill and Anatoly had made an abortive attempt to buy some milk the night before. Nobody responded to their knock. They came into a spacious and clean entry and stopped in the door leading into the room.

It was a clean room. There were rag-work runners on the floor. The walls were decorated with posters on cattle-breeding, an old ikon and a portrait of Voroshilov in uniform. The tablecloth was folded back and bits and pieces of a half dismantled sewing machine of a very ancient make were lying on a newspaper.

"Grishka! " Anatoly called softly.

There was no answer. Only the edge of a curtain rustled against the wallpaper.

"Grishka! " Kirill called louder.

Silence again.

The door opened behind them. Enter Auntie Tatiana.

"Here you are," she said. "Good morning. Have you come for cucumbers? "

"No, cucumbers can wait. We're looking for Grishka."

"Grishka? No need to look for him far. He's inside mending my sewing machine." Auntie Tatiana went up to the door and glanced inside. "That's funny. He's not there. He sent me to bring some machine oil from the driver. He said he couldn't manage without it." The old woman put down a small jar on the table beside the sewing machine and looked around.

"Come on in, sit down. I'll give you some milk."

Kirill and Anatoly sat down at the table. The old woman wiped her hands on her apron and disappeared behind the partition by the stove. Then she gave a loud scream and jumped out.

"Who's there? " she gasped.

"Where? "

"There," she said in a frightened whisper and pointed to the partition with her elbow. Her glance was now wary and suspicious.

"And why, pray, did you run away yesterday, good people?"

Kirill and Anatoly rose from the table.

The old woman backed away, then dashed to the window and yelled out, "Ivan! Ivan! Help! Help me, you lazy oaf! "

Kirill and Anatoly went over to the stove. On the platform beneath the chimney, among a collection of pots and pans, stood two huge felt boots smeared in soot and ashes. One boot rose a little. Smoke was curling from under the heel. It must have been burnt with a live coal.

Anatoly resolutely knocked at the boot with his knuckles.

"Hey, comrade! "

The boot came down, pressing out from under the heel a cloudlet of acrid smoke.

Anatoly knocked again.

"Hey, what are you doing there? "

"Where? What's wrong? " came voices from the living room. Auntie Tatiana, the tractor-driver and the girl-clerk came round the partition.

"Here! " the old woman said accusingly, her arms akimbo. "And the third, a pal of theirs, is rummaging in my stove. I noticed them snooping about yesterday."

"Looks bad for you, citizens," said the tractor-driver. "What are you doing here? "

"Nothing at all."

"We're looking for Grishka."

The girl-clerk was peering round the tractor-driver's broad back.

"Are you looking for him up the chimney? " she asked. "He's not a leg of ham, you know."

"Let's see your papers," said the tractor-driver and stepped forward, his huge biceps tensed.

"That's right, Ivan, my boy, ask them to show you their papers," said the old woman.

At this point the felt boots made a move. One lowered itself from the platform, found a stool

and stepped on it, then the other followed suit. A cloud of soot flew out and then Grishka emerged, black all over and gasping for breath. He sneezed and opened his eyes.

"Holy saints! " the old woman gasped. "Whatever have you been doing up the chimney? "

"I was exploring the bends."

Grishka's voice was husky, as though his throat was full of soot. He kept clearing it and spitting black saliva into his palm.

The old woman came to after the shock and grabbed a wooden pan-holder.

"I'll give you bends, you rascal! Take a sewing machine to pieces and then 'crawl up the chimney, will you? "

The tractor-driver came up to Grishka, poked him into the stomach and said admiringly, "A plague and no mistake! "

Grishka jumped down from the stool, dodging the old woman's stick. He brushed against Anatoly, smearing him with soot while executing the manoeuvre.

"The stove-builder says yours is a high-class stove. That's why your bread tastes best of all."

The old woman lunged and grabbed his forelock. "It's me that makes bread, not some bends or other. Burning my old man's boots! I'll shake the mischief out of you! "

Kirill and Anatoly were sitting on the window-sill in their cabin, tormented by a surmise which neither of them dared to voice outloud.

Soon Grishka made his appearance.

"Pulling people by their hair, how d'you like it? " he mumbled, smearing the soot all over his face. "Don't you worry, we'll get on with it in a moment." He walked over to the stove, stood a while looking at it, then asked, "Perhaps you'd like the Russian kind after all? " His eyes sparkled. "There the chimney bends like this...."

"Look here! " Kirill finally exploded. "Why don't you tell us straight that you've never built a stove in your life? D'you think we are a couple of dupes who can't see a thing? "

Grishka turned away.

"I never told you I have. I haven't." He stood there, doodling on the floor with his galosh. "I can do carpenting. I can drive a tractor. I can look after the generator at the station. I even mended a sewing machine, a Singer, for Auntie Tatiana."

"We saw how you mended it," Anatoly retorted.

"But it's the tenth time. The shaft has worn down, so you can't do much: She needs a new one...." Grishka stood snuffling, his head bowed. "Stoves, well, sure I never built one...."

"Why fool us along then? " Anatoly asked in a tired voice. "Why must we play at stove-building with you? "

"You have nothing to do with it of course." Grishka lifted the pail with mortar from the stove edge and put it on the floor. "But our stove-builder is a real shark, a varmint, people call him. Look how many houses have no stoves. The price he charges—you have to sell your cow to pay him." Grishka slapped a brick in place into the

corner of the stove, then another. His movements were angry as though he was doing it to spite somebody.

"He's as mean as they come. He never lets anybody come near him when he works, he's afraid to lose his monopoly. I watched him for three days through the window. When he reached this high," Grishka took the two newly-laid bricks off, dropped them back on the floor and knocked on the stove wall with his trowel, "he saw me and went after me with a spade. But we'll build this here stove, don't you worry. The main thing is the bends. When I get the idea.... Just you wait a little...."

Kirill and Anatoly produced a roll of paper, spread it on the floor holding the ends down with bits of brick.

"What is this for? " Grishka asked.

"For a design of the stove. D'you expect us to sit with our hands folded waiting for you to see the divine light? "

They spent the whole day lying on the floor and working out the stove's design. The three of them, together, Grishka shedding his air of superiority.

"The draught comes up, doesn't it," he reasoned. "When the air has gathered speed, then is the time to make the bend."

Kirill drew a bend.

"Like this? "

"Right! " Grishka yelled. "We'll fix 'em yet...."

All the same, at one point he said wistfully:

"Perhaps we'll make it the Russian kind after all? Everybody has Russian stoves around here. To bake bread."

"Just you keep your nose to the grindstone," Anatoly shut him down brusquely.

Towards evening they resumed the building work. Grishka laid the bricks. Anatoly and Kirill fetched and carried bricks and mortar.

"Come on, brother bricks, lie you down clean as picks. Down some kindling we'll send, the smoke will crawl right up the bend," Grishka improvised at the top of his voice, up under the ceiling. Suddenly he looked up and said with dismay: "What about the hole? We need a hole in the roof to stick the chimney out."

Kirill and Anatoly climbed up the garret. Kirill started cutting a hole in the ceiling and Anatoly in the roof.

Kirill was not much of a hand with a saw and the boards he cut out fell in. "Hey! " he yelled wildly, "watch out! " He thrust his balding head through the hole, peered and yelled louder still, "Hey, what the hell are you doing? "

Anatoly looked down too.

Grishka was dismantling the stove, laying down the bricks and scraping off the mortar.

"Have you gone mad or what? " Anatoly jumped down from the garret and burst into the house. "Undoing everything we have done! Look, it's dark outside."

"We've made an omission," Grishka said.

"What have we omitted? " Kirill asked through the hole in the ceiling.

"We need a cubby-hole, like in Auntie Tatiana's stove."

"What the hell d'you mean? What's a cubby-hole, blast you?"

Grishka unfolded the drawing.

"Well, it's a kind of hole in the stove-wall. People dry socks in it. Warm boots. Auntie Tatiana's cat sleeps in the cubby-hole."

"But we haven't got a cat," Anatoly said wearily, sitting down on the floor beside Grishka.

"Don't you worry, I'll get you a cat." Grishka came up to the stove and showed them what a cubby-hole should look like.

"It's like a burrow. Well, anyway, a stove without one is like a bicycle without a bell. The warm air blows into the room from this here cubby-hole."

In the end they built a cubby-hole. And they built three and not just one bend. They made the chimney wide, as befits a proper Dutch stove.

"A truly magnificent heating installation," Anatoly said admiringly.

"A monument," said Kirill.

"That's not all," said Grishka. "We have to caulk and dry it yet."

The third morning crept into the house unexpectedly and softly. It trembled outside in muslin mist. It filled the house with the smell of grasses, which overpowered the smell of clay and mortar.

"How quiet it is," Kirill said.

"The radio will start up in a minute," said Anatoly. '"Good morning, dear comrades.'" Anatoly glanced at the walls of the room.

"Don't you worry," Grishka reassured him, intercepting his glance. "I'll lay on the radio for you. Then it'll be a proper house."

Once caulked, the stove became a real beauty.

Grishka brought in an armful of dry brushwood, while Kirill and Anatoly started for the spring to wash.

They poured pailfuls of water over each other and slapped themselves on the sides, proud in the weariness of their muscles. Thus engaged, they did not notice the farm chairman approach them. Beside him trotted a shy-looking smallish chap in a striped shirt buttoned up to the neck.

"Here," the chairman nodded at his companion. "Good morning. The stove-builder came back yesterday. If you agree about the price, of course...."

The stove-builder smiled self-deprecatingly.

"I have heaps of orders. Everybody wants to get ahead of the others. And that means money. The number of bends, now, that too makes a difference."

Anatoly regarded the stove-builder gravely. Kirill also examined the man like an exhibit.

"Sure," said Anatoly, "the bends are the main thing...."

"Also, it depends what kind you want." The stove-builder shifted his feet. "Stoves are different kinds, you know. Russian stoves, to bake bread. The Dutch stove, just for warmth. Also the pot-belly...."

"Those are the fancy kind," Kirill prompted him.

The stove-builder corrected him gently:

"They're for comfort. The pot-belly is...."

"What we want is that kind," Anatoly interrupted him. He moved the branches aside and pointed to the roof. At that moment the chimney spat out a large dense cloud of smoke. The cloud swirled over the chimney edge, grew white and streamed merrily upwards.

The stove-builder blinked. His eyes darted here and there, his fingers fumbled. All of him came into motion, as though he had touched something hot.

Grishka, covered with clay and all but dropping with fatigue, came out.

"Your work? " the chairman asked.

"The three of us.... We built it together," Grishka answered apprehensively. Then, realising nobody was going to give him a hiding for what he had done, he straightened up with dignity and gave the stove-builder a leer.

The chimney was smoking. The cabin seemed to be floating past a wooded bank. It woke the thickets and frightened the stillness with its gay and homey look.

WE SWORE AN OATH

No matter how you scrub the staircase after the walls and ceiling have been freshly painted, the steps always have a whitish film as though covered in hoar-frost. The window frames are dazzling white. The handrails sparkle with varnish.

People step on freshly scrubbed stairs gingerly as though walking over Persian carpets. They smile as they breathe in the ticklish smell of paint and examine the ceiling critically.

Cats don't like clean stairs. They spit angrily and retreat to cellars in search of dark mildewed corners. In the midst of clean stairs spiders and wood-lice fall dead from chagrin.

Rem was hopping down the steps. "It's so pretty you daren't even spit." "Hey, what's this? "

On the brand-new, not quite dry pink plaster somebody had scratched with a nail:

"Val and Rem love Katya."

Rem's friend Val stood gaping at the inscription.

"However do people find things out? " he asked wonderingly.

"Find out what? " Rem exploded. "We must get rid of it before everybody has seen it."

He dashed downstairs and returned with a big chunk of brick, but Val stopped him.

"One mustn't conceal one's feelings," he said. "It cheapens them." "How's that? "

"It does, that's all." Val was seven months older than Rem and so enjoyed seniority rights.

"One must be above petty mockery." He stretched his neck out, raised his eyes skywards dolefully and sat down on the window-sill.

"Suit yourself," muttered Rem. "Just as you please. Let them write about you on every staircase in the house."

He swung the brick at the place where his own name was written. A big piece of plaster fell down. Rem stamped on it, making a disgusting mess on the floor.

"Let the boys laugh at you. Why should I be mixed up in it? I haven't gone off my rocker yet. What rot! "

He licked the white dust from his lips and spat.

"I'm quite shaken," said Val. "It's easy for you with your thick skin.... Do you feel anything at all? "

"Sure. My back itches." Another thing Rem felt was hunger. "Next time I'll take a piece of bread with me," he decided, sitting down beside Val.

The smell of lime caused a dry tickly feeling in his throat. Rem looked morosely at the newly painted doors, mail boxes and name plates over the bells. There was' also an odd sign on a piece of cardboard: "Knock for Tolstopyatov." Somebody had added: "But not too loud." Then it occurred to Rem that Tolstopyatov was Katya's mother. Why can't people knock loudly for her? And anyway, why knock when one could ring? Why must people write all sorts of things on walls? Rem glanced at the wall where somebody had scratched their names. It looked ugly now, with a big gaping hole in which he could see the

laths and rusty nails. Pity to have spoiled the wall on account of some stupid fools.[1] Rem looked down. He yearned to get away from that place.

Suddenly Val gave him a nudge. "There she comes."

Katya was coming across the yard humming something to herself. She liked to hum. She was wearing a blue dress with some pattern embroidered down the hem. There were two large bows in her pigtails.

"She's pretty all right," Rem thought miserably. "Look at all those ribbons, I'm sure she stuck them in on purpose."

Val jumped down from the window-sill, straightened his shirt, smoothed down his hair, then climbed up again and gnawed a finger-nail.

"What shall we do, Rem? Shall we beat it, perhaps? "

Rem spat on the clean floor tiles.

"If you ask me, she should be given a couple of fillips to stop her strutting about with all those ribbons! "

Val jumped down again.

"What am I going to say to her? "

"Look at him, afraid of a girl! I can say anything whatever to her. Shall I? "

"No, let me do it my way. You'll only spoil everything."

Rem was the first to appear in front of Katya. He gave her a grim look and said: "Halt! " And he kicked a piece of brick into the groove under the drain-pipe.

Val came out from behind his back. In his agitation he was rolling up his sleeves.

Katya backed away. Rem, mechanically, grabbed her by the pigtail.

"Stay where you are! "

Val began his declaration.

"Katya," he said and gave a pig-like squeak in trepidation. His face became scarlet. "I say, Katya...."

The girl lifted her blue frightened eyes to his face and gave a sob.

"I've never done a thing to you," she said piteously and, jerking her pigtail free, ran off leaving the big white bow in Rem's hand.

"It's all your fault! " Val hissed, all but pouncing on his friend. "You frightened her. Give me the bow! "

"Here, you can stuff it...."

* * *

Parents come in categories. Some wouldn't bat an eyelid at the loss of a ribbon, others will kick up a row to raise the dead from their graves. Which kind is better is for the children to judge when they grow up.

Rem and Val were hiding in Val's bathroom. Katya's mother was in the living-room. They could not hear everything she had to say to Val's parents, but they did catch her parting shot from the hall:

"I warn you it is the influence of the street. You'll shed bitter tears yet."

Val took the bulb out of the socket. It was a timely precaution because the next minute they heard his father's steps approaching the bathroom door. He knocked on it.

"Open the door, Val! "

"I can't," Val answered, "we are printing photographs."

"Very well," his father said meaningfully. "Come and see me when you're through."

"Okay," Val responded.

Rem was silent. It didn't look okay to him. One could never tell where Katya's mother went after leaving Val's place—home or to Rein's flat.

"What we are going to do? " Val whispered bending to his ear.

"Grin and bear it. It won't be your first hiding, will it? "

"I don't mean that at all, " Val said with dignity. "I mean what are we going to do about Katya now. She'll never want to look at us after this. You know what—let's write her a letter. Can you write poetry? "

"What now? You want to write a poem, go on and write it. It's you who's in love."

Val sat down on the edge of the bath obediently, rolled his eyes and moved his lips.

"Look at him," Rem said scornfully. "I'd write her one, I'd sure compose her a lyric: 'Want your stupid ribbon back, mew for it like a hungry cat.'" Val fidgeted on the edge of the bath.

"Stop it, it puts me off my stride." He rolled his eyes some more and finally announced: "Here, listen:

Greetings, Katya, We have come to you as friends, Do not fear, we shall do no harm. We shall nevermore give you offence, We shall always do as you demand."

Val bent down to Rem's ear again.

"This is only the beginning. The main thing will come later."

Rem snorted: "I'd give her such a greeting, she won't have one ribbon left. You do as she demands, but leave me out of it. And in general your poem is just wet."

"Do better if you can," Val said in a huff. "I'm not a classic."

"Leave it to classics then!"

Val jumped up. He was really mad now.

"It's all your fault, you grabbed her by the pigtail."

"So it's all my fault, is it? " Rem snarled. "Very well then, go and do your precious Katya's bidding, and leave me alone! "

Rem banged the door and went home.

* * *

Rem swore he would not approach Val first, would not try and make up, would not even say hello. He had a feeling he had been robbed of something important and precious and that it had been given to somebody else.

Rem was sitting on a drum of cable and trying to peel off a piece of insulation. The electricians were laying a cable to the research institute, or

maybe to the new underground station or to the wide-screen cinema. None of the boys knew where exactly. The cable was entwined in a thick steel band and smeared with brown tar on top.

"If I pick a hole through, Val will come up to me himself and say he's sorry," Rem was thinking although he knew that he had no hope of picking a hole even with a pen-knife.

A boy would sometimes make a wish: "If I see a falling star, I'll be lucky." There are many stars in the sky. Suddenly one of them would tremble and flicker and roll down right into the boy's lap. All that is needed is to really wish it very hard.

They had been friends ever since they started school. Behind the sheds they swore a solemn oath: "Sky and land, steel and honour. Hook! " The last word was the one Red Indians used to denote that everything had been said and there was nothing to add. As for the word "love", they had only been applying it to ice cream, soda water and boxing.

Rem was picking at the tar on the cable and licking his sore fingers, utterly oblivious of his friend Val circling around the drum. "Rem! " No answer.

"Rem, have you swallowed your tongue? " No answer.

"Rem, I know what to do about it."

"I don't care. I don't want to talk to you."

But he had already talked to him.

Val climbed onto the drum, put his arm round Rem's shoulders, patted him on the back with a friendly hand and whispered in his ear:

"What we want is hypnosis...."

"Why don't you invite somebody from the circus?"

"Now, don't play the fool. You're a born hypnotiser. Your eyes are black and your ears stand away from your head, your lips are thin and your chin is like a brick. You've all the signs."

"And you have a crooked nose and your eyebrows are different colours."

Val slapped his friend on the back once again.

"Never mind the eyebrows. And to hell with poetry. Poetry's rubbish."

Val jumped down from the drum and raised his hand with his thumb sticking upwards.

"Look here.... Concentrate your will...."

"Ah, so you can't do without me," Rem thought with satisfaction. "It's always 'I this' and 'I that' with you, but when it comes to a pinch.... If only Katya knew which of us is the hypnotiser." Aloud Rem said: "It's the last time I'm going to help you. If it doesn't work, I'm through. I have other things to attend to."

* * *

Katya was sitting by the open window reading The Three Musketeers and thinking: Were there at least one real musketeer hereabout, he might open the door, make a bow and a flourish with his hat and say to me politely: "My sword is at your service. I am awaiting your orders...." Katya looked out of the window. Auntie Nastya, the yard-keeper, was unrolling her hose, preparing to

wash the yard. Val and Rem were climbing onto the roof of the shed opposite her window. "Why are they climbing that roof?" Katya wondered. "Why are our boys so heartless, and so unattractive?"

Val was giving orders up on the roof: "Come up here, nearer the edge." He moved Rem almost to the edge and himself sat down behind him.

"Begin now. Concentrate your will. Send it to her in short impulses.... I'll try it too."

"What shall I send her? " Rem asked.

"About me.... Tell her I...," Val reddened. "You know—you're not a baby."

" 'Val loves you,' is that it? "

"Well, there are no other words to express it, are there? "

Rem rubbed his eyes with his fists, blinked a little to clear his magic gaze and fixed it on Katya.

A light fluffy curl swayed on Katya's temple. Her face was very clear and thoughtful. There were some freckles on the bridge of her nose, just a few.

"Why are they staring at me? " Katya wondered. "Is my nose dirty perhaps, or is there a spot on my cheek? " She looked into the mirror, straightened her hair and smoothed out her collar. "Stupid fools! I suppose they think they're being funny, that's all." She resumed her reading, but in a few moments it was interrupted by a loud shout down in the yard: "I'll show you, climbing them roofs."

The yard-keeper was standing by the shed and waving her broom in an attempt to sweep Val and

Rem off the roof like housewives sweep cobwebs off their ceilings.

"You damned goats! " she screamed. "Isn't the ground good enough for you? Down you climb this very minute! "

Their eyes still fixed on Katya, the boys moved off from the edge of the roof.

The yard-keeper waved her broom some more, promised to box their ears when they came down and returned to her hose. She was an old and kindly soul. She treated the hose as if it were alive. The hose jerked in her hands trembling with strain. She threw it wary glances.

Katya stretched out of her window. She just could not understand why the boys were gazing at her so fixedly.

Val was whispering into Rem's ear: "Give her another couple of impulses. See, she's already looking at us. See, she's frowning. I'm only afraid the hypnosis may send her to sleep. Katya! " he yelled.

The yard-keeper swung round in fright. A taut spurt of water hit Val full in the face and sent him flopping on his back.

"Hay, what d'you mean? " Val howled and fell through the roof. He fell onto some kind of sacks, then rolled down into a heap of some soft stuff which filled his nose, ears and eyes at once.

Val opened his mouth to sneeze, and at that moment Rem dropped on top of him and Val found himself buried in some fine powder.

He did sneeze now and protested: "Careful there, do you have to land right on top of me? "

"Don't kick. I've gone blind from that hypnosis of yours, I can't see a thing..."

From above water trickled down on them. The powder in which they had landed became slippery and sticky.

"Get out, you! " came the frightened voice of the yard-keeper. "You aren't hurt, are you? " She grabbed them by the collars and helped them to get up.

Rem dashed out of the shed howling piteously: "I've gone blind, oh, oh, oh! "

The old woman bent down to him, solicitously: "What's the matter, dear? Don't scream so, you'll make yourself sick."

"There's nothing wrong with his eyes," Rem heard Val's voice. "It's the cement. Pour some water in his face from that hose."

With the yard-keeper's help Rem washed his eyes open and looked at Val. His shirt had turned into a kind of coat-of-mail of a dirty green colour, lumps of cement had stuck to his trousers; his hair stood upright and, drying quickly in the sun, was turning into concrete. Rem clutched at his own head—Ms hair was almost a solid mass.

"Oh, Val! " he yelled again. "They'll have to shave our hair off! "

"Goats, that's what your are! " the yard-keeper shouted at them, now that her fears had been set at rest. "Break roofs, would you believe it? "

"Come on! " Rem shouted.

Katya was looking at them out of her window and laughing fair to split behind her book.

"It's the end," Val said on the staircase with a sob. "She laughed at us."

* * *

The sky overhead was blue and vast. One could go mad from the game of "What would be if I wasn't? " And the sky was blue and nobody except the scientists cared about the storms, turbulences, electric discharges and the black cold void that made up its warmth and clearness.

Val and Rem were lying on the grass in a young park. A parachute swayed overhead.

"The books say that you always suffer when you fall in love," Val was complaining. "I feel as though I'm dead. Nothing can save me. Rem, go and buy us some ice cream, will you? "

Rem did not move.

Val turned on his side and licked his dry lips. He enjoyed his suffering. Nobody understood him, nobody was sorry for him, not even his best friend Rem. She might be laughing still at her window. On the other hand, she might be wandering about the yard forlornly, all alone, asking everybody: "What happened to that brave and strong boy? Why do I never see him any more? He's so much better than that black-eyed Rem friend of his."

Rem was also thinking about Katya. It was nice and rather funny to be thinking about her, for after all, it was not him but Val who was in love with her. Oh, never mind, he was thinking of her in a general sort of way.

Rem imagined that Katya came into the park and was walking among the flowerbeds, the two bows on her head like two propellers.

Rem rose, stretched himself until his bones crackled and went to the parachute tower.

"Where are you off to? " Val asked.

"I'll go make a jump. I'm not in love, so I don't have to cherish my precious self for somebody."

"I'll jump too," said Val. "If only Katya were here, what d'you say? "

A broad-shouldered chap from the local branch of the DOSAAF was supervising the jumping procedure.

"Comrade instructor," the boys addressed themselves to him, "could we make a jump from the tower?"

"Children are not allowed," the chap answered melancholically. "You haven't enough weight."

"We could jump together," Val and Rem suggested, squaring their shoulders and standing on tiptoe. "It's very important for us. We won't fall out of the harness."

"I told you you were not big enough," the chap retorted, knocking them against each other and pushing them towards the exit gate.

Val and Rem were lying in the grass again. You had to be grown-up! Pah! Had they been grown-up, they'd have been ashamed to jump from this silly tower.

"Are you a friend of mine, Rem? "

"Sure, so what? "

"Do you despise me? "

"Sure I do," Rem was about to say, "drooling over a girl like that," but for some reason he

couldn't bring himself to say it and even looked away in confusion.

"No, I don't. Why should I? "

"You are a real friend, Rem. You must help me."

"Okay."

That day the two friends decided to grow up. What could possibly attract Katya in a couple of kids who wore faded unpressed jeans and down-at-heel tennis shoes and never used handkerchiefs to blow their noses. Sky and Earth. Steel and Honour.

* * *

In order to grow up one needed money.

The two boys were standing inside the gate wondering how to get hold of some money.

Katya entered the gate.

The boys turned to the wall pretending to scrutinise the list of tenants.

They never stirred while Katya cautiously walked past behind their backs. Only Rem twitched his shoulder-blades, as though someone had passed a cold wet finger down his spine. His eyes were fixed on the poster urging people to buy state lottery tickets. When Katya was gone Rem said, "I know how we could get hold of some money! "

"Where? How?"

Rem nodded at the poster. Each of them was the proud owner of five lottery tickets. They'd

been saving money for those tickets since New Year, for one could win a Volga car on a fifty-kopecks ticket.

"No good," said Val. "We won't know if we've won until November."

"Doesn't matter," said Rem. "We can sell the tickets and then we shall have money."

"What about the Volga? "

"We'll win the Volga next time."

Val gave the poster a lingering look. A painted car rolled along a painted road driven by a painted chap beaming at the two boys with his painted smile.

"You are a brick," Val whispered.

Later that very day the boys planted themselves in front of the big department store, holding the tickets up and calling invitingly: "State lottery! "

"Let us lend our money to the state! "

"You can win a Volga, a country cottage of your own, a refrigerator."

"Buy a lucky ticket! "

"What's all this hawking? " a formidable frowning militiaman demanded, his hands on the ready to grab them by the collars.

"Don't you go insulting us! " Val cried indignantly. "We're not hawking, we're helping to distribute state lottery tickets." •"How much a ticket? " the militiaman asked.

"Fifty kopecks. The price is written on the tickets," Rem explained to the militiaman politely and then yelled for all he was worth, "Come and buy your lottery tickets, citizens! Let's show the initiative. Let's try our luck! "

The militiaman walked off, then came back.

"What public organisation entrusted you with the job? "

"The State Bank," Val blurted out.

Rem explained politely: "We are showing our initiative. This is a useful thing for the state, and you go suspecting us of something or other."

To have done with this ticklish problem, the militiaman asked: "How many have you left? "

"Four."

"I'll buy them." He handed the boys two rubles and reached for his whistle mechanically. "And now beat it."

The boys duly beat it.

* * *

Money is a funny thing. It weighted the boys down. They became strangely restless.

"Money is something one must simply get used to," said Val.

"Money is something one must simply spend as soon as possible," said Rem.

Five rubles is quite a tidy sum, and if they added to it the forty kopecks their parents had given them for cinema and ice cream, it added up to quite a pile.

Val and Rem stood on the staircase. Val wore freshly creased trousers and a clean shirt. Rem had said, "You won't catch me dressing up for her," but put on a new vest all the same. Each held a bag of lollipops in his hand. They were

waiting for Katya. She took a long time to turn up, and to while away the time the boys started sliding down the banisters and jumping over four steps at a leap.

"Let's have a lollipop each," Rem suggested.

"We shouldn't really. She'll notice."

"Let's take them from my bag. I'm not going to make a present of it." Rem put his bag on the radiator and took out two lollipops. "Here! "

The time flew faster with lollipops.

Multicoloured wrapping papers speckled the staircase like autumn leaves. When there were no sweets left, Rem blew into the bag and dashed it with an explosive sound against his palm.

"Must you litter up the place? "

Katya stood above them holding on to the railing. Her pose was that of a timid doe ready for flight.

Rem, feeling cheery and magnanimous from all the lollipops, grinned at her, his mouth stretching right across his sweet-smeared cheeks.

"Hello, Katya. It's not litter. These are nice little bits of wrapping paper. We'll pick them all up in a mo. We've been waiting for you."

"What d'you want with me? " Katya asked.

Val stepped forward and stretched out his bag.

"It's for you."

Suddenly Rem felt a bitter taste in his mouth. He gave Val a glare.

"So that's how it is! " he thought. "You've eaten all my sweets and you're now making a present of yours, from yourself."

"It's from both of us, Rem and me. Help yourself," said Val.

Either Katya was in a mood for a sweet, or she decided to use this opportunity to start on a programme of taming the boys, or for some other reason, anyway, she did not refuse the gift, but sat down on the window-sill between the two friends.

"Let's eat them together."

Val took a sweet with his two fingers gingerly, as though it were a butterfly.

"You know," he said, "Rem and me have eaten three kilos, we don't want any more."

"Why is he lying? " Rem wondered. "There was only half a kilo in the two bags."

But he refused any more sweets too. He began to feel in the way. Katya was talking to Val all the time, while Val forgot his manners and started downing one lollipop after another, two to every one of Katya's.

Rem sat there glumly, making chewing movements with his cheekbones and wondering what to say, so as to make Katya turn towards him and forget about Val.

"Stop eating all those sweets," he finally commanded. "You'll gorge yourself sick."

Katya almost choked and stared at Rem, her eyes blinking.

Rem sniffed in embarrassment.

"I don't mean you, Katya, you eat all you want. I mean Val. He's already eaten three kilos and he still can't stop. I wonder where he puts them all."

Katya laughed and looked at Val with gay inquiry.

"Really, I'd never have guessed you eat a lot. You're not fat at all. You must be very strong then."

"Yes, I'm strong," Val admitted unblushingly. "In my class I can take on any boy with my right hand tied behind my back."

Rem grew crimson with indignation. If they ever fought, they always did it together. Meanwhile, Val bragged on: "I also make jumps from the parachute tower."

Rem jumped down from the window-sill.

"That's enough," he said. "Let's go."

"Where? " Katya asked.

"To the park. Let's do the swings and the merry-go-rounds."

"Yes, Katya, let's go," Val seconded him. "You'll see me doing the full circle on the swings. Or let's go to the cinema if you like." Val took a running jump over four steps. Had Katya not been there, Rem would have taken one too, but now he just walked down the stairs sedately. But Katya decided to imitate Val's feat, took a jump, but caught her foot on the third step and nearly fell down.

"Hey! She's some girl! " thought Rem catching hold of her.

"You jump swell," Katya praised Val. "I can't do it like that—because I'm a girl I suppose."

"That's nothing," Val reassured her, "it doesn't matter in the least. And I'll teach you, if you like."

That was more than Rem could bear. He crouched and then, without preparation, made a leap clearing four steps.

"Oh, look at that! " said Katya and laughed.

There were plenty of vacant seats in the bus. While Val was buying tickets with an important air, Rem sat down beside Katya.

"Let's count women in red dresses," he suggested.

"Let's."

Val took a seat in front of them and threw Rem a reproachful look.

"What's so special about women? " he said. "Let's count beards."

"Let's," Katya agreed.

At that point a woman with a baby got on and Val had to give her his seat. He took a position beside Rem and Katya

"There's a beard drinking soda water. That's one," said Val. "There's another walking out of a shop. Two." He gave Rem a slight prod to indicate that he should give up his seat because he, Val, was supposed to sit with Katya.

Rem shrugged his shoulders.

"There's a woman in a red dress," he said.

"There's another one." said Katya.

Val went into a sulk. He saw a vacant seat in front, and went to sit there staring out of the window forlornly.

Rem and Katya counted fifteen women in red dresses and six beards. They'd just started an argument about a dress that Rem thought orange, when Val shouted, "We've arrived! Get out! "

There were few people about in the park during the daytime. Only some little kids with their grandmothers, who had not yet been taken out of Moscow for summer, and students with

tired eyes. The kids were playing in the sand-pit and every once and again venturing into the lawns to pick a dandelion. The students were poring over their books and probably seeing nothing in them, for their eyes kept closing of their own accord.

Val bought four tickets for the swings. He gave Rem two, saying, "Find yourself a partner, Rem, they won't let you swing by yourself. I'll swing with Katya."

"I'm afraid to go on with you," said Katya, "you swing too high. I'd rather swing with Rem."

"I'll go easy," Val reassured her, but Rem had already grabbed Katya's hand and ran towards the swings with her.

"Serves you right," he thought vindictively. "That'll teach you to boast. If you didn't fib so shamelessly you'd be swinging with your Katya now." He helped Katya into the swing and when the braking board was released, started working on the boat so hard as though he was out to make a full turn above.

Val watched the boat swinging higher and higher and Katya laughing and Rem doing his damnedest to outdo everyone else.

"Call yourself a friend, do you? " Val muttered. "Very well then."

"Now come with me," he dashed to Katya, when she and Rem were done. Katya sat down on a bench and shook her head.

"No, I can't. I feel giddy."

Val ground his teeth and looked around. A snub-nosed girl in slacks and a white jersey stood by the fence. She looked at the swings yearningly

as she counted the small coins in her palm. Val caught her by the hand.

"Come on, let's have a go. I have a spare ticket. You aren't scared, are you? "

"Scared? " the girl laughed confidently. "See that you don't get scared yourself."

Silently, biting her lower lip, Katya watched the swing go up and down and Val and the girl in a white jersey squat rhythmically in turn, the girl's pigtails hitting her across the face.

Val came out limping.

"That was swell. My leg's gone numb from all the work. That was a brave kid, she's not in the least afraid."

Katya rose from the bench.

"I'm not afraid either. We can do it higher than the two of you. Have you money for two more tickets, Rem? Come on! "

Rem made for the cashier's box. Val ran after him and caught him by the hand.

"Look here," he said. "Who is in love with Katya, you or me? You promised to help and instead.... Calling yourself a friend, too."

"Haven't I been helping? " Rem exploded. "Is it my fault if you've been fibbing and bragging all the time? "

Val looked hurt.

"Well, if you swing with her again, we're through. And that is that."

Val walked off and Rem stood at the cashier's a long time wondering what to do. "Why can't I tell Val to go to hell and leave Katya alone, because I'll be protecting her now? No, that'll be

a dirty trick. Val was the first to fall in love with her." Rem glanced at Val hesitantly.

"Do you want a ticket for the swings, boy? " the cashier asked leaning out of her window. "They've closed down for lunch."

"What did you say? " Rem asked, coming out of his indecision.

"Closed for lunch," the cashier repeated and closed the window shut.

Rem put the money back in his pocket.

Val asked him glumly: "Have you bought the tickets? "

"No."

They came up to Katya.

"No more tickets," said Rem, "they've closed down for lunch."

"Yes, Rem is on the square," thought Val. Aloud he said: "Want some ice cream, Katya? We can buy you as many as you like." And he pulled some bills out of his pocket.

Rem pulled some out too.

"Really, would you like ten? "

"Where did you get all this money? " Katya asked.

"Won the lottery." Val waved the money in front of Katya's nose and couldn't resist another temptation to boast: "We've got heaps of money. Ten rubles even."

Katya stood up and caught his hand.

"Boys," she said, "let's not buy any ices. Let's buy a table-tennis set instead, for everybody. What's the good of climbing roofs all the time? "

Val and Rem exchanged looks.

"Good for Katya," Rem thought.

All the way to the sports shop Rem walked behind the other two. He kept looking down at his feet and when he raised his eyes he couldn't help noticing women in red dresses and counting them.

Besides the table-tennis set the boys bought two small dumb-bells as a present for Katya.

"Here," they said. "That'll build up your muscles. And come out into the yard tomorrow, we'll teach you to play table tennis."

* * *

Sunday is a wonderful day. It means the week is over, the clouds have all floated away and the sun is shining brightly.

It was as though a coil of spring was unwinding in Katya's heart. It threw off the blanket, pushed her out of bed and stood her on the floor. Katya would have liked to do a somersault, but she did not know how. So she just raised an arm and a leg. She would have liked to raise the other leg too, but how was she to stand then?

As she made her bed she thought about the boys. "I think they're both nice. And handsome. Rem must be very honest because he keeps silent all the time and his eyes are stern. He will probably become an atomic physicist. Now Val, his eyes are shining and he's a great talker. He will become a poet. They are both strong and nimble. And not really so rude."

Katya took the dumb-bells from under her bed, clanged them against each other and started doing exercises the way the boys had taught her yesterday. Hands up, hands to shoulders, hands apart, squat, hands stretched out in front.

When Katya's father came home from Severomorsk, he, too, did morning jerks with dumb-bells. Only his were very heavy. When Father went away Mother dragged them out into the passage, one at a time, invariably grumbling: "Give a man half a chance and he'll clutter the house up with all kinds of old iron things."

Father liked to sing in the morning:

Puma ruma ra,
Puma ruma ra,
Oop-la-la.

Katya waved her dumb-bells around singing like her father:

Puma ruma ra....

Her mother entered the room.

"Come and have breakfast," she said. When she caught sight of the dumb-bells she frowned:

"What's this now? "

"To develop my muscles," Katya answered. "Val and Rem's present."

Mother's eyebrows went up and her eyes rounded.

"What, those same bullies who snatched your ribbon? Making friends with hooligans, are you? "

"They are not hooligans at all. They are good sorts. They gave me candy yesterday. And they bought a table-tennis set for all the kids of our yard to play."

Mother's eyebrows rose higher still. She took the dumb-bells away from Katya, wanted to throw them out, but, finding no receptacle for them, put them in her apron pocket.

"So they gave you candy, did they? Fancy, how chivalrous. What d'you think you're doing? You're much too small for this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing? " Katya asked in a whisper and sat down on the edge of her bed. "We did no kind of things. We just went on a swing."

Her mother sat down beside her.

"They are nothing but street urchins. Where did they get the money? Did you ask yourself where they had got the money? "

"I don't know. They said something about winning a lottery."

"Did they now? " her mother cried with strange relish. "They must have stolen a state bond. Just the right company for you."

Katya huddled miserably and said nothing. Her mother was almost shouting: "We must stop it before they go to the dogs completely. It's your duty. They may be corrected still." Her mother took off the apron, hitting herself painfully on the knee with the dumb-bells.

"Get dressed! " she shouted. "Let's go at once! " "Where? "

Katya dragged herself up the stairs after her mother counting the steps and muttering to herself:

"I don't believe it.... It can't be...." In front of Val's door Katya burst out crying: "I'm not going in.... It's not true...."

Her mother grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into Val's flat.

* * *

"Ping-pong, ping-pong," sang the celluloid ball. It had been hopping over the table since morning. You may hit it as much as you like, it does not hurt the ball. But even a ball has a strength limit and can crack if you hit it too strong or at an awkward angle.

Children made for the table as soon as they came out into the yard.

"Who's the last in the queue? I'll be after you! "

The loser gets out, the winner stays on for another game.

"Come on! " shouted Val and Rem. "Anybody may play. It's our common property."

Every now and again Val and Rem cast glances at Katya's window—she's taking a long time today.

Val's father came out of the front door.

"Come on inside, brothers," he said threateningly, grabbing the two boys by the collars.

When fathers speak in that-tone of voice, it bodes no good.

The game stopped. Somebody started untying the net. Somebody put the balls and the rackets in their box.

"You go on playing," said Rem.

"The set is for everybody," added Val.

They jerked in the father's strong grip muttering: "What have we done now? "

Val's father held them fast. He led them past the yard-keeper. The old woman frowned and shook her head in sympathy. He led them past the house manager. The house manager scratched his head. The children by the tennis table maintained a stolid silence. The little kids in the sand-pit laid aside their shovels and buckets.

Val's mother was waiting for them, sitting in the living-room.

"Here they are, the gangsters," the father said pushing the boys towards the table.

"We both work, we haven't got much time, but all the same we've been doing our best to see that you grow up a decent person," Val's mother began, "and you...." Her voice broke. Her eyes were red, and so was her nose. "Look here, Alexander," she said to her husband. "I don't believe it. I can't believe it...."

"Now, own up that you stole money from your mother," Val's father thundered.

His mother winced.

"Don't shout," she said. "If he's done it, Val will own up. Has somebody been putting you up to things, Val? "

"Nobody's putting us up to anything! " Val cried hotly. "I've been friends with Rem ever since we started school, and we took no money from anybody, and you won't get any other answer if you torture us with red-hot iron! "

"Don't shout at your parents," his father barked stamping his foot. "You're just a kid, and you go shouting at us."

"You see, Val," his mother said, "people have been telling us funny things about the two of you," and she reached towards the table uncertainly.

The boys shrank. A pair of small black dumb-bells lay on the table beside a vase of tulips.

"Turn out your pockets," commanded Val's father.

Val and Rem obeyed. They put on the table the remaining fifty-four kopecks.

Val's mother gave a deep sigh, rose from the sofa and went into the kitchen.

Her husband glanced after her, grunted disconsolately and pushed the boys towards the sofa.

"See what you've done to your mother, you brute! ... lie down, both of you...."

Val lay down on the sofa as though for a nap, pushed his fist into his mouth and closed his eyes.

"You have no right to belt me," Rem protested. "I'm not your son.... We've done nothing wrong! "

"Doesn't matter whose son you are. I'll give you a good hiding, and your parents will thank me for it. Do you think I enjoy thrashing the likes of you? "

Rem jumped back: "I won't let you anyway! "

Val's father thought awhile, then sighed, took off his belt and was about to begin applying it to that quarter of Val's anatomy which is the receptacle of all moral lessons.

Val tensed and stuck his fist further into his mouth.

Rem clutched the edge of the table.

"Wait! " he cried. "Val and I did everything together, so give us a belting together too." He lay down beside his friend on the sofa, pushed his fist into his mouth, following Val's example, and mumbled: "Vevin wow (Begin now)."

It was a comfort to be beside a friend and the hiding did not seem so terrible. The boys moved closer together, tensed their muscles and stared at the same spot on the upholstery.

At that moment the door was flung open and Val's mother ran in with her shopping bag in her hands.

"Wait! " she cried to her husband and standing on tiptoe whispered in his ear:

"Here, I've found the money. It was under that newspaper." She looked at the boys with commiseration and asked: "Did he hurt you badly, boys? "

Val's father flung away the belt and muttered angrily: "Serves you right! That's what comes of listening to every fool of a woman...."

"Yes, yes, of course," stammered Val's mother. "They'll tell us everything of their own free will. Let's all go into the kitchen."

The boys were sniffing sorrowfully at the thought of this monstrous betrayal, and the pain

that can be inflicted without the application of a knife, belt or red-hot iron.

Val took his fist out of his mouth and swallowed a lump that was five times bigger, salty and shameful. He swallowed it with difficulty, with a great effort, but it was probably that which made his eyes dry and hard.

"It's not so bad for you, Rem," he whispered. "Very well, they could give us a belting—it wouldn't be the first time." He laid a hand on Rem's shoulder. "It's a lot of crap, this love business."

Rem kept staring at the spot in the upholstery.

"So it is," he whispered sadly.

It was quiet in the room and they could hear the ping-pong of the celluloid ball coming from the yard.

There and then, on the sofa, the friends swore an oath that as long as they lived no girl would ever touch their hearts.

"Sky and Earth. Steel and Honour. We swore an oath. Hook."

TIME'S URGING

1

At six in the morning the alarm clock stirred, gave a tentative tap like a drummer trying out his sticks, and then rattled away. Other alarm clocks awoke in the other rooms of the communal flat.

The alarm clocks were telling their owners that it was time to wake up.

The people threw off their blankets, stretched and hurried out into the kitchen for a wash at the sink.

The grown-ups got up at six. That was their waking time. The children could go on sleeping as long as they liked. The summer holidays were here.

There were three children in the flat, Boris, nicknamed Scram, Volodya Glukhov and Gene Krupitsin.

Boris jumped up at once. He always rose with the grown-ups. Waving his towel he ran out into the kitchen to find the middle-aged weaver Maria Ilyinichna already installed there. Her kettle was whistling merrily as it spouted steam to the ceiling. Another neighbour, the milling machine operator Krupitsin was brushing his teeth at the sink. He looked at Boris out of the corner of his eye and shrugged his shoulders.

"But I got up as soon as the alarm clock went off," Boris said disappointedly. "I wanted to be the first."

Maria Ilyinichna smiled good-naturedly.

"When you've worked as long as we have you'll learn to be the first. Time will be ticking away inside you."

Boris took possession of the sink. He liked the morning's vigorous rhythm and the feel of cold water on a still sleepy face. But grown-ups always chased him away:

"Scram! "

"Let me wash my face! "

"Here, move off! "

Boris fought back.

"Why, can't I wash? I'm in a hurry too."

Soapy streams trickled down his back. He pushed his cupped hands under the tap and always complained: "Oh, let me through, there's soap in my eyes! "

He liked the morning scramble at the sink. It made him feel he really was in a hurry. He really had things to do. The only person he conceded the sink to un-protestingly was Krupitsin's wife.

"I wish somebody would tell me why he's always making a nuisance of himself in the morning," she would grumble, holding onto the skirts of her flowered dressing gown. "It's not as though we haven't told him not to a thousand times. Oh, very well, go ahead and wash. I'll wait. I have nowhere to hurry. I'm sure you have more urgent things to do."

But when Gleb dashed out into the kitchen, things really began to hum. He always rose the last. He would stifle the alarm clock with a pillow and sleep on doggedly until Maria Ilyinichna or some other neighbour pulled his blanket off him.

Gleb seemed to be woven out of cables, he was so muscly. He would smear Boris with soap foam, tickle him, laughing uproariously himself, and snort like a walrus. Then he would start stretching the taut elastic of his chest-expander and throwing around a two-pood weight.

Almost everyone had breakfast in the kitchen. Gleb would shove large chunks of sausage under Boris' nose urging him, his own mouth full:

"C'mon, Boris, eat up. It's better to oversleep than undereat." '

Krupitsin was the first to go. He worked in the experimental shop of a research institute and went to work with a briefcase in which he put a loaf of bread and a bottle of yoghurt. The next to leave was Boris' father, a driver, and Maria Ilyinichna's husband, a builder.

By seven o'clock all the grown-ups were gone. A viscous silence took possession of the flat and Boris was dogged by the feeling that he was late for something very important. With a sigh, he would start tidying up his family's room.

There was a slight smell of petrol in the room. On the wall hung photographs of all the cars his father ever drove. On the chest of drawers, beside the dinner service, lay a funny-shaped steel gadget, a French curve. Boris' mother had made it with her own hands when she was still in training at the factory trade school. His mother was very proud of the curve, cleaned it with sandpaper and would rather part with the dinner service than with the curve.

As he swept the room, Boris moved the chairs about noisily, to drive the silence away. But it

would not give in. Only the clocks could really stand up to it. They ticked away in all the rooms, telling the world that working people lived here, that they had gone about their business and would come back at the appointed hour.

2

The summer holiday had blown Boris' friends out of the city. The yards were empty and he had no one to play with. Boris' father was soon to go off to Kazakhstan with a convoy of lorries and Boris would go with him. Meanwhile he found life inexpressibly boring.

Boris wandered about, gaping at things, getting into people's way and crossing the most traffic-infested streets with great daring.

At ten and a half, Boris knew a terrific lot of things. He knew that synthetic rubber was obtained from alcohol, that perfume could be made from coal and that wood-shavings could be transformed into lovely silky fabric.

Boris was walking along the street. Soot was crunching underfoot. But he knew that gas mains had already been laid to the factories and soon the furnaces would be fired with gas instead of coal, producing great heat and no smoke. Then the sooty clouds over the city would melt away, the sunrays would tan the city dwellers' pale skin and there would be more flowers. Volodya Glukhov had once told him that under Communism letting out smoke into the air would be a criminal offence, tantamount to attempted murder. And Boris decided that they should issue

a law that decreed the beginning of Communism as of today, and that would put everything to rights.

Boris lived in Leningrad's Lenin District, where factories stand shoulder to shoulder and where tugs hoot on the river and gulls scream overhead.

On Ogorodnikov Street, which leads to the port, Boris ran into his neighbour Gene Krupitsin. Gene was striding like a dragoon, trying to match the pace of a tall chap in a snow-white shirt.

The chap was carrying a raincoat slung over his shoulder, his hands stuck in his pockets. He favoured nobody with his glance, and looked as if he owned the street.

Gene gazed raptly at the chap and kept swallowing in his excitement. When he caught sight of Boris, he winked at him as though to say, "See what kind of people know! " He, too, tried to look at the passers-by through narrowed eyes, as though they were something far-away or beneath him.

Boris trotted alongside wondering what was the matter with Gene. Could this friend of his be really such an important person?

Boris soon fell behind them and tried walking the way the tall chap did. He pushed his hands into his pockets and strode along tensing his calf muscles as though he was walking up stairs. To achieve an even closer resemblance, he pushed his lower lip forward and drew his eyebrows together over the bridge of his nose. Passers-by started turning to look, and two girls giggled pointing at him. Boris got bad-tempered, gave a

kick to a tabby-cat who dared to walk out of a front door and retorted to the threatening scowl of a stout yard-keeper with a look of dignified indifference.

The yard-keeper shook her sausage-like finger at Boris, climbed onto a trailer-scooter and drove off under an archway. The red rattling scooter valiantly bore her fifteen stone plus a platform of sand.

The two giggling girls sniggered and started across the street.

"Citizens, look at those two silly schoolgirls. They're violating traffic regulations."

The two girls dashed back on the pavement. Only now they noticed a traffic cop with a microphone on his chest. But the cop raised his hand. The cars stopped on both sides of the street. An ambulance was rushing headlong towards the crossing.

"Make way! Make way! " its sirens screamed. "We must outrace trouble! "

Nothing must be allowed to hinder this headlong rush.

"Make way! Make way! "

At the end of the street the ambulance slowed down and turned into the yard of a tall house covered in scaffolding.

Boris forgot about the giggling girls, the cat, the yard-keeper and her scooter and even about the traffic cop with his mike. He was already running to the shiny ambulance and the fast-moving people in white smocks. He would have liked, above all, to be of some help. And when the stretcher was carried past him, he took hold of its

edge, to ease the weight. The patient had thin hair and eyes leaden with fright, sunk deep into their sockets. Boris recognised him.

"It's Glukhov," he cried. "Volodya's father."

The engine roared again. The ambulance dashed out into the middle of the street.

3

They used to say that Volodya's father had hands of gold. They also said that one day a museum was going to be opened where the main exhibit would be a worker's hands cast out of platinum, the eternal metal.

When Volodya's mother died, his father started drinking from grief. At first he did it timidly. He would turn his wife's portrait face to the wall and only then produce the bottle. He would drink the first glass hurriedly, without sitting down, as though afraid it would be taken away from him. Then he would sniff at a piece of bread and start weeping.

"Alone," he muttered, smearing his tears all over his face. "I'm all alone. You've betrayed me, left me all alone." He would cast a reproachful glance at the portrait. "Weren't we happy? "

At that time Volodya was quite little, only seven years old. He would crawl into the corner between the sofa and the stove and wait for Mummy to come. He kept hoping that she would walk into the room and all this would be over, and life would go back to normal. Probably his father kept hoping for the same thing, though he

never mentioned it. Grown-ups are ashamed of such things.

Glukhov would fall asleep, his head on the table. Volodya would wind up the alarm clock lest his father overslept for work and sit down to do his lessons.

While in his first year at school, Volodya learned to wear holed stockings heel up and trim the frayed ends of his trousers with scissors.

People did not tumble to what was happening to Volodya's father at once. He drank all by himself, and never made any noise. He worked as a welder at the Admiralty Works and sometimes, in his cups, started an argument with somebody:

"Why are you spying on me? You know what you can do with your help! Am I doing my work? Yes, I am. Then leave me alone. My feelings are my own...."

Sometimes he would call Volodya and ask him, looking away:

"Perhaps we should get married, sonny? Do you want a new Mum? "

Volodya made no reply. He knew by then that there are no new mums, only new step-mothers.

"Keeping your mouth shut, are you? " his father hissed. "And what d'you think it's like for me? " But obviously he, too, was afraid of such a drastic step, afraid of new bother and worry.

Once several of his work-mates came to the flat. Volodya was already in the third form at school. They gave him money and food they had bought and said his father had burnt his arm and had been sent to hospital.

"He can't hope for a pension," the neighbours discussed the incident glumly in the kitchen, "he was drunk. He's gone and done it and no mistake."

The neighbours fed Volodya and mended his clothes. Especially Maria Ilyinichna. Her husband helped Volodya with his homework and even attended the parents' meetings at his school.

Volodya went to see his father at the hospital almost every day. He got into the hospital grounds through a hole in the fence, dodging nurses in the garden and doctors on duty in the corridors.

His father never said much. He seemed to find his son's presence oppressive. Only once, the day before he was discharged, did he stroke Volodya's hair, screwing up his eyes. When he returned home he spent the first evening looking through various diplomas he had got for excellent work at the factory. He cradled his crippled arm and kept wincing and sighing.

Volodya came up to him and said,

"Never mind, Dad, we'll get by. Just you keep a hold on yourself."

But weak people are proud. His father pushed him away and went out.

His work-mates from the factory came to visit him several times. Glukhov received them in morose silence and tried to get rid of them as soon as possible. When they were gone, he would mutter resentfully:

"Come to show consideration. Like hell I need your consideration. You can stick your factory.... I'll get along without you."

He found himself a job as a bath attendant. Now he drank looking straight at his wife's portrait and shouting:

"Yes, I drink. You can look as much as you like. Here I am, Ivan Glukhov! You don't like it? I don't give a damn! "

He would poke his crippled hand into the portrait. His hands had become white and flabby, like two dead fishes.

Time seemed to have stopped in their room. The alarm clock never rattled away in the morning. Volodya stayed on at school till evening. He would sit in the school library reading or doing his homework. He only laughed at school or out in the street. As he approached his house, he grew silent and he entered the flat grim and taut, always ready for trouble.

Sometimes his father would ask, "Show me your hands, sonny."

Volodya showed his hands.

"Here they are," his father muttered, "hands of gold. Take care of them, Volodya.... Stand up for your father."

But more often it would be something very different:

"Gadding about, wearing out one pair of shoes after another, are you? " he yelled at Volodya. He would snatch his schoolbooks out of his hands or push his face down into his notebook:

"Look at the student! Too big for your boots. Where am I to find the money to keep you at your books, you cold-blooded newt? Whatever I earn, it's never enough. Go and return the empty

bottles, d'you hear me? Buy a small one for your father! "

Volodya collected the bottles and went to the kiosk where you got the money back on them. Instead of a "small one", however, he would buy bread and potatoes.

His father poked his fist into the son's face.

"That's how you obey your father, is it? I'll show you! "

Volodya stared at him stubbornly, never uttering a word. Then his father would really let himself go. He would curse his late wife for bearing him such a son. He cursed his own kindness and other people's cruelty. He yelled himself hoarse. All the while Volodya would stand in a corner and, catching a moment when his father had to draw his breath, plead:

"Don't shout so loud, aren't you ashamed in front of the neighbours? "

"Blast the neighbours! I'm my own master and a father to my son! "

Glukhov would go out into the kitchen, sit on a stool in the middle and announce belligerently:

"I've given my newt a what-not, did you hear?"

"You're worse than a newt yourself," Maria Ilyinichna would rebuke him. "This vodka makes you blind. Oh, dear God, why had Volodya to get such a worm for a father."

"Bloody heel, that's what you are," growled Scram's father. "I'd run you over and never turn a hair."

Gleb would clench his huge fists.

"Listen, you," he once said to Glukhov, pinning him to the wall in the passage, "if you don't stop

mauling Volodya, I'll knock you into bits, and no hospital will take you on for repairs. Is that clear? "

"Who are you to threaten me? " Glukhov blustered. "Is it long since I gave you my old pants to wear? Volodya is my son, and I'll do what I like to him."

Still, after that encounter Glukhov did not beat Volodya so often.

* * *

Glukhov started disappearing for days on end. In the morning he would gasp and cough rackingly as he drew on his first cigarette. His mind would wander at times. He would stop in his tracks and mumble something, his eyes growing glassy and the veins swelling on his temples.

Volodya would spend hours tracking his father down in the nearby bars.

Maria Ilyinichna offered to adopt Volodya, but he refused.

"I have my own father."

He did well at school. He developed an interest in photography and radio, played basketball and drew well. He even played the Brench horn in the orchestra of the Lensukno Weaving Factory where they took him on Maria Ilyinichna's request. And he had a firm friend in the flat, little Boris who was nicknamed Scram.

Volodya would tell him fairy stories in the dark corner in the passage where the pails and wash-basins hung on the wall. Later Volodya fixed an electric bulb in this corner and would often spend hours there with Boris, assembling some simple radio set. He gave Boris books to read which he himself brought from a lending library and explained to him patiently about seas, stars and atomic energy. When Volodya hid in the corner from his raging father, Boris would sit beside him, a silent bunch of sympathy.

Boris often wondered why life was so unfair to Volodya. He could not understand why Volodya's father was angry with his son and what he beat him up for.

"It's another thing when they punish me," he reasoned. "I broke a vase. I smeared the neighbours' cat with jam, and they made a terrific row about it. I sheared Mum's collar to test the action of the hair-growing lotion. I picked holes in my shoes so that water could get out of them and I could walk across puddles, and Mum had to throw them away. But what has Volodya done? What does he get punished for? "

Boris hated Volodya's father and was passionately devoted to Volodya. He learned to play the French horn, straining until he was blue in the face, he learned to use the Smena camera, he put up a wire ring in the corridor and was learning to play basketball. Scram was the only person in the world who had an inkling of how Volodya really felt.

Volodya would have no truck with Gene Krupitsin. It was as though they lived in different

flats. Gene thought Volodya was a queer fish and talked to him condescendingly.

"A diet of potatoes," he would hold forth, "does predispose one to concentration and self-improvement. Still, why eat potatoes when there are so many opportunities to get hold of steak? "

And Gene was forever on the lookout for such opportunities.

When Gleb had not yet enrolled in an evening course at college but was working as a mechanic in foreign-going vessels, Gene used to help himself to small change from the pocket of his coat hanging in the corridor which went to satisfy his need for various small necessities, of course.

This triggered off a brief but savage conflict within the rising generation of the flat.

Once, when Gene was fishing in Gleb's pockets, Scram came on the scene.

Gene winked at him, jingled the coppers in his palm, said: "A small customs duty," pushed the money in his pocket and opened the door. Volodya Glukhov was standing on the landing with a shopping bag in his hand.

Gene glanced into the bag. "Potatoes again," he remarked with a condescending smile, and went out past Volodya. But before he had descended the staircase, Volodya and Boris caught up with him.

"Give that money back! " Volodya said curtly.

Gene smiled again, an open-hearted generous smile.

"All I'm prepared to give you is a punch on the nose."

A strong clout on the chin sent him sprawling on his back on the tiled floor of the entrance hall. He lay there for a while gasping like a fish.

"How much did you take? "

"Peanuts," Gene stammered and turned out his pocket. Coins rolled clinking over the floor. Boris picked them up carefully. They went back into Gleb's pocket.

In June, when school was over and Volodya went up to the ninth form, he started looking for a job for the summer so as to earn the money for a coat, but things turned out differently.

Of late his father had taken to bringing fellow-drinkers home.

They would sit round a table heaped with cigarette-butts, stubbly, moth-grown, as though eaten with rust, and talk about life.

Volodya was ashamed to listen to their ravings, just as he would be ashamed to look at a person who fouled up the floor in an underground station. They made him angry and sick.

Once he found his father alone. He came up to him and stared at his bony shaking back for a long time.

"Stop ogling me," his father hissed, rising, a glass in his hand.

"Here," he said, "drink it. Then you will understand ... and forgive me. Here. Perhaps I've got like this because of you." Glukhov pushed his scrawny chest forward. "Do as your father tells you! "

But Volodya was in no mood for forgiving. He took the glass and dashed its contents into his father's face.

His father's cheeks, flabby like knitted fabric, quivered. The tendons in his neck grew taut. Glukhov grabbed the bottle from the table by the neck and swung it.

Volodya dashed into the passage. Glukhov came crashing after him. Gleb, who chanced to be passing by, got hold of him and dragged him into the kitchen.

"The newt! " Glukhov screamed. "Throwing vodka in his own father's face! Me sparing no effort to bring him up...."

The neighbours stood around in silence. Gleb brought an old wall-newspaper which he had specially gone to Glukhov's factory to get and unfolded it before the drunk The newspaper carried Glukhov's old photograph and an article about him which said: "The welder Glukhov is a real artist at his job. Nobody can do the ceiling seams like he does. His welding is straight as an arrow, without a single hollow or burn. Glukhov has been issued with a personal stamp. His work is never checked by the inspector."

Glukhov took a long time reading the article, his finger playing with his drooping lips, then shrank all of a sudden and began to weep.

Everybody felt awkward. Maria Ilyinichna, who could not stand the smell of dust, suddenly started sweeping the floor with a dry broom. Her husband stood glumly pulling at his thick grey eyebrow.

"You've forgotten you're a worker, Ivan. It's all your own fault. You repelled all who wanted to help you. And you cannot live alone, no, you cannot. Not a sap like you!"

Glukhov rose and went into his room without looking at anybody. A few minutes later he returned to the kitchen with his diplomas.

"It's not true," he wheezed, flourishing his diplomas. "I am a worker! "

He gave them a wild look and stormed out of the flat. And he took with him the last thing that was left from Volodya's mother, her watch.

Volodya was running along the street, his fists clenched, his eyes unseeing.

Buses rolled past, their polished sides sparkling. Trams shed sparks on the asphalt. The street was flooded with sunlight. Below, under the ground, the blue metro trains sped along. People read newspapers and argued about everything under the sun: sputniks, government notes, the recent rain and the advantages of "Novost" detergent. The second shift of workers was on its way to work.

Volodya boarded a tram and rode on it from one terminus to the other and back. He finally got off in front of his school. He was in luck—a group of hikers was starting out on a trip and he joined them.

"I won't come home ever," he said to the omnipresent Scram as he left. "I have no father any more. He and I live in different epochs."

4

"Make way! Make way! " the ambulance screamed in parting and took a comer at full speed.

It was dark in the flat. Boris knocked at all the doors and there was nobody in. Only the very last door, Krupitsins', gave in at his push.

What a room it was! The floor was shiny. All the furniture looked dressed up like a bride. The ashtray had some kind of lacy pattern on it. The sofa had not a wrinkle and was springy and carefree. The cushions played with all the colours of the rainbow. There was a slight smell of mothballs. Krupitsin the elder permitted of no flighty smells.

Boris stepped across a small hallway and stopped dead in the doorway. Gene was sitting on a chair in front of a toilet table. He was smoking a cigarette, his lower lip pushed out, and sipping something from a wine-glass. He was admiring himself in the mirror and assuming picturesque poses. He was wearing a wonder of a shirt. His upper teeth had a crown made of the golden wrapper of a chocolate medal.

Boris was struck speechless.

"What is it you're wearing? "

Gene's shirt was sporting labels of hotels and wines, prospectuses of tourist firms and airlines.

Gene gave him a slow haughty look, poured himself another glassful from a decanter and exhaled a cloud of smoke into Boris' face.

Boris sniffed at the decanter's neck. It smelled of tap-water.

"Why are you drinking water out of a wine-glass—haven't you got a cup? "

Gene raised his hand majestically.

"What can you understand, you, embryo of the atomic age? I'm rehearsing the dolce vita. The

hundred and second floor. An electrified cave. Syncopes and rhythms." Gene spat the cigarette out onto the carpet, but immediately retrieved it. He blew the ash from the sofa cushions.

"Have you seen that chap? He sure knows how to do business. A foreigner tied up at the port this morning,"—he pulled the shirt out at the stomach —"and here we are. We took it right off him."

"I'll tell your father that you smoke."

"Oh, no, Scram, you won't. Volodya wouldn't approve of telling tales. And even if you do, I don't care. The epidermis is up in arms within me." Gene laughed and tossed off another glassful.

At that moment the bell rang frantically in the hall, and Gene ran to open the door.

The long chap Boris had earlier seen with Gene entered the flat. My, wasn't he a swell sight! He wore a cornflower-blue coat that shimmered as he walked.

He was followed by Gleb who squeezed a loaf of bread and a length of sausage under his arm.

The long chap straightened Gene's shirt solicitously and asked, nodding in Gleb's direction: "Who's that excavator? "

"A neighbour," answered Gene with an ingratiating giggle.

The long chap came up to Gleb, felt the sausage, sniffed the air and clicked his tongue.

"Looks as though we have a nice spot of grub here. Let's join forces." He produced a ten-ruble note from his pocket, gave it to Gene and said:

"Now, Gene, old chap, be so kind as to run and buy us a bottle of cognac."

"Volodya's father was taken by an ambulance! " shouted Boris, "D'you hear, Gleb? "

The long chap looked down at him from above, one eyebrow raised: "Kicked the bucket, did he? So what? One more, one less."

Boris suddenly felt a burning in his nose, as though he had taken a sniff of smelling salts.

With his free hand Gleb grabbed Gene and pulled him back from the door, then he pushed the loaf and sausage into Scram's hands and took the long chap by the lapels of his coat.

The cornflower-blue coat with a metallic shimmer in it cracked at the seams.

"Careful you," squealed the long chap. "My coat...."

"You know what you can do with your coat? " growled Gleb. He opened the door and tossed the long chap out onto the landing.

"What hospital did they take Glukhov to, Scram? " he asked.

"I don't know."

5

The neighbours came home one by one throughout the evening. The women made the rounds of the shops after work and came in loaded with bags and packages. The men worked farther away from home and returned later.

The reaction to Scram's piece of news was rather lukewarm.

"So he got himself in trouble again," said Maria Ilyinichna as she fitted her mincer on to the kitchen table.

"Maybe it'll knock some sense into him," she muttered after a while, working the mincer.

Krupitsin said reasonably: "That was to be expected. As for knocking sense into him, it's a forlorn hope. It's become a physical need for him. There's nothing can cure him now, except hypnosis."

"Come on," his wife urged him, "it's none of our business, so what's the use of wagging your tongue. We meant to go down to the shops before they close."

Boris was sitting in Volodya's closet surprised that the news he brought did not seem to distress the neighbours too much.

Gleb came in, his head bent.

"He's dead," he said simply.

The neighbours fell silent. They stared at Gleb as though blaming him for this death. Gleb averted his eyes. His neck flushed purple.

"I've been to the hospital. He died."

Silence crept out of the corners and chinks and filled the kitchen, clinging to the curtains and the fly-papers.

"Now isn't that an epidermis? " Gene suddenly cried out.

Everybody turned towards him.

Krupitsin seized his son by the collar and pushed him into the middle of the kitchen.

"Bum! " he screamed. This was the first time he had sworn at him in other people's presence. "Good-for-nothing! Have I been working myself to the bone to see you grow up like this? I've been asking them to give you a job at my institute so that you could be among cultured people. I don't

sleep nights over textbooks to provide for you! " Krupitsin was seized by a fit of coughing.

Maria Ilyinichna gave him a glass of water.

"You'd be prepared to die if it would get your son a decent place in the other world."

"Nobody's asking you!" Gene's mother dashed into the fray. "Go home, Gene, this very minute."

She pushed her son into their room, flung an ominous glance at her husband and banged the door shut.

"What's going to happen to Volodya now? " asked Gleb.

Maria Ilyinichna resumed her mincing.

"Volodya'll be alright. We'll help him along. He'll make out. He will. I won't have it otherwise," and she gave the handle of the mincer a great push, as though there was a piece of bone stuck there.

"You must understand, Eugene," said Krupitsin senior as he prepared to go to bed, "you're growing up. You must learn to be a bit more serious about things. Mother and me won't live for ever. Try and show people you're a man, show them you can be relied on."

Another kind of conversation was going on in the room next door.

"Look here," Maria Ilyinichna's husband was saying. "Suppose I find him a job at our construction site? What d'you think? "

Maria Ilyinichna made no answer. She was remembering that distant day when her husband brought her into this room and how happy she had been to have a room of her own. In 1926 Sasha, their only son, was born. And in 1944 he

was killed in Germany. She wiped her eyes with the corner of the pillow-case.

"Let him make his own decisions," she said with a sigh.

On the other side of their wall Scram lay curled up in his bed searching his mind for words to comfort Volodya when he came back. The words must be brief and manly, like at war. Boris frowned, clenched his fists and muttered sternly: "I say ... you know what... don't take it too hard...."

In the room next to the front door, amidst a jumble of rolls of drawing paper, weights, dumb-bells, impressed shirts and souvenirs from distant seas, Gleb was tossing in his bed.

The dust-cart was growling outside as it gobbled up the garbage. The clanking of spanners and the buzz of welding came from the next street where they were repairing the tram tracks. The night sounds were soothing and lulled people to sleep. They were like a bridge between the sunset and the dawn.

6

The Admiralty Works arranged Glukhov's funeral. The coffin was followed by working people—welders, rivetters, assemblymen, smiths and electricians, his comrades whom he had betrayed.

The band played a reproachfully sad melody. Crumpled up diplomas lay on the floor of Glukhov's room. A dim bulb hung on a dried-up flex. Tobacco smoke had settled in the corners in

cobwebby layers. The air itself seemed to have thickened into cobwebs and stick to the face.

Maria Ilyinichna opened the window. She had brought in a pail of hot water, some rags and soda. Seram's mother helped her to scrub the room clean of all its accumulated foulness.

Seram's mother spread a tablecloth on the table. Maria Ilyinichna placed a vase with daisies in the middle of it.

* * *

Volodya returned from his hiking trip in the afternoon. He whistled as he walked home. His cheeks were peeling from all the sunshine.

Scram was sitting on the school porch.

"You're tanned," was all he said. But Volodya realised something had happened.

When they entered the room Scram said nothing either.

The room was clean and the air was fresh. Volodya's mother's portrait was hanging on the wall above the sofa and beneath it were displayed his father's diplomas for excellent work, which had been carefully ironed out.

"What's the matter with Father? Has he got married or what? "

Scram shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. I've been away."

Volodya took off his shoes, put his feet, weary from all the walking, on the cool floor and smiled.

Gene opened the door and looked in.

"So you're back," he said. "Well, what can you do...."

Boris looked down. Gene pulled several notes out of his pocket and pushed them under the flower vase.

"It's for you. You'll pay it back when you can. And don't get too upset. After all he wasn't much of a father. You'll probably be better off now he's dead."

Volodya started and turned his head slowly towards Scram. Boris was unable to lie to a comrade, and anyway there was no point in it. "It's true," he whispered. "He's dead."

Volodya sat immovably, holding a shoe in his hand. Boris sat down beside him and made patterns with his finger on the dusty boot.

Gene ran to his room and came back with a silk shirt.

"Here," he said, blinking his eyes and puckering his lips. "It's the latest thing, Dutch stuff. Only don't tell Mother. Oh, get off it. Things're not much better for me. Dad's taking me to work tomorrow, and still I don't let it get me down."

The neighbours trickled into the room and formed a silent half-circle in front of the sofa.

Volodya was lying with his face to the wall. He was looking at his mother's portrait. Her eyes were kind and a little anxious. His father's diplomas were pinned underneath it

"Now, don't feel lost, sonny," Maria Ilyinichna began gently. "We've been thinking what would be best for you, but you'll have to make the decision yourself."

"Would you like to work with me? " her husband asked point-blank. "To build tall houses?"

"I could get you taken on at our motor depot, if you like," Scram's father drawled.

"You could learn to be an assemblyman at our factory," Scram's mother said with a sob and walked out hurriedly.

"I can be of help, too," Krupitsin offered, moving a chair up cautiously. "It's a research institute. Creative work, almost intellectual. You could work together with Eugene."

Volodya turned round and sat up, propping himself up against a cushion. They all noticed suddenly that his neck was very thin, that he had not had a haircut for a long time, and that his eyes were tearless and looked straight as a ray of light.

"I'll go to the Admiralty Works to learn to be a welder."

Everybody looked at Gleb.

Gleb sat down beside Volodya, put his huge hand on his shoulder and said approvingly:

"That's a good lad."

Scram's mother brought a bowl of salad from the kitchen, some meat balls with mashed potatoes and a glass of milk.

Then the neighbours left. Scram hung about for a while and left too. He understood Volodya needed to be alone. But he just could not stay cooped up in the flat

His parents were taking shirts, undervests and towels out of the sideboard. His father was making ready to go on his run to Kazakhstan. His

mother was laying aside shirts of a smaller size and Boris knew very well who they were for.

Maria Ilyinichna was busy at her sewing machine making Volodya a pair of trousers and a jacket out of Gleb's seaman's uniform.

Boris could not contain himself any longer and went back into Volodya's room again.

Volodya was still lying on the sofa. Maria Ilyinichna's husband was pacing up and down the room talking:

"It's a good thing you've decided to follow in your father's footsteps. It's a good trade. It's right and proper that the welder Glukhov...." At this point the builder stopped short and after a pause went on, with more warmth, "But all the same it's a pity you decided against the trade of a construction worker. It's rather hard to lure people into the building trade. You're always in the open, in the wind and the rain.

In frost, too. But then you have a skyful of sun. Any builder, from architect to navvy, is the vanguard of society. Why so? Because he lays down the foundation not only of a house but also of new relationships between people. Think for yourself. What is it some people live for? To get themselves a washing machine of their own, a television set, a library. They will read a book and then put it away on the shelf, or, as often as not, put it straight there without reading it at all, and there it will stay gathering dust. And they will go on amassing things, all for themselves, for themselves alone. They will wall themselves off from others with their possessions and be in seventh heaven. Work is a nuisance for them

then. What they would really like to do is to stay home and admire their possessions...."

The builder stopped to draw a breath.

"Now, think for yourself. If the builder builds a house in which there is a library for all to use, and a canteen with good meals, dietetic soups even. And a modern laundry with no queues and a medical post. A salon for people to get together on each floor. And a TV set in this salon the size of the wall. And, to be sure, a flat for all in accordance with the size of the family.... How do you think will people live in a house like that?"

"Under communism there'll be buttons to push all over the place," Scram answered for Volodya.

"Scram, you button-pusher," the builder retorted, frowning. "What button shall we have to push to give you a belting under communism? "

Boris snorted protestingly.

The builder straightened his jacket, pulled a daisy out of the vase and said, smoothing out its petals:

"A builder must see the house he is erecting in every detail. He must, and that's that. And here you say...."

But Volodya was not saying anything. He was asleep.

The builder pushed Boris lightly towards the door. In the doorway he looked back and glanced at the alarm-clock. For the first time in many years it was wound up for six o'clock again.

The night above the city was transparent and blue. It was reflected in the sea with a steely shine and seemed to be ringing softly.

The sea was everywhere. It had dissected the city with its rivers, canals and branches. It flooded the city with pink fog and kept itself in the picture with the hoots of tugs and the clanking of anchors.

The city was not asleep.

The bridges parted their heavy wings to let the ships through. Electric sparks drowned in the wet asphalt. Caravans of lorries rolled past the palaces and the sculptures. The switches clanged on the railway tracks.

Leningrad is a big city.

Like a tree's yearly growth-rings, new residential districts encircle the centre. The youngest and the most impressive have risen on the outskirts. The streets here are greener and wider. The air is cleaner. Beyond the houses lie the horizon and the sky. The outskirts are like an open window through which the morning and the wind burst into the house.

Here stand the factories.

Here the powerful energy of time is generated.

Time urges us on.

Get going, it says.

7

The next morning Boris, as always, rose with the grown-ups.

Volodya Glukhov and Gene Krupitsin were already at the sink.

"You wait, Scram," shouted Gene's mother, "let the two of them wash. Can't you see they must hurry to work?"

Under Gleb's guidance, Volodya and Gene were throwing handfuls of cold water on their chests and backs.

Maria Ilyinichna brought the jacket and trousers she had made Volodya out of Gleb's things and told him to give his shoes a polish.

"You must come to the factory neatly dressed. You're a worker now." She gave Volodya a once-over and pushed a polythene lunch bag into his hands.

Krupitsin, meantime, was overseeing his own son's preparations. He looked disapprovingly at his new trousers and smart jacket.

"What have you dolled yourself up for? Who will your mates think you are? Put on old things. You're a worker now, don't you understand?"

Smoke drifted across the blue sky, settling on the window-sills in a layer of crunchy soot. People waited for trams at the stops. They nodded to each other and took up the conversation interrupted the evening before. They read their newspapers, and stormed the crowded trams.

Gleb led the way, followed by Volodya and Scram. The Admiralty Works was quite near, on the other side of the Kalinkin Bridge and beside the floating shop selling live fish.

In Gas Avenue they saw two militiamen leading along a lanky chap.

"What's the time?" the chap asked.

"What d'you want with the time?" the militiamen asked, holding the chap tight by the elbows. "Time needn't concern you any more."

Gleb frowned and his eyes grew dark as tempered steel.

Scram listened to the noise of the works, trying- to distinguish the whistling of turning lathes and the rat-tat of rivetting automatons.

Clouds sailed overhead, catching at the tops of the cranes and mixing with banks of steam disgorged by the turbines and the boilers.

The seagulls screamed.

Pneumatic doors of the trams slammed shut.

Crowds of workers walked towards the gate.

With a farewell wave to Boris, Gleb and Volodya walked through the gate.

The minute hand of the big clock on the gate reached the figure twelve.

The square before the works was empty.

Again Boris had the feeling he was late. But it no longer worried him. He knew that his time would come and urge him on too.

We beat him till the blood came. But it did not make us feel any better. If you asked me what we bashed him about for, I could not really tell. All I know is he deserved it. And how.

Our village is called Svetly Bor. I don't think there is a place to beat it for the scenery anywhere else. The river Tikhonya shines as though it's not a river but a sunray. And the woods! Have you heard the organ play on the radio? That's how the woods sing when the wind wanders among the tree-trunks and tries to force its way up into the open, but the pines hold it down with a low hum. People think they know everything about the woods, but if you try to explain what it is about them, you find there are no words that can describe the beauty of the forest.

The roads in our village are soft and your feet sink into the hot dust up to your ankles. It's not like the city dust; it does not rise up in clouds when you walk through it, it's more like water. When the geese cross the road it's as though they were swimming.

Our air is thick with sweet smells. The old people say you can brew beer out of our air.

I'm sure Alfred did not notice all this beauty. Had it touched one single string in his heart, everything would have probably worked out quite differently. I don't believe he had ever seen apple-trees in blossom. It's as though thousands of pink birds have descended on the branches

and sit there working some kind of charm with their wings.

There are many orchards in our village. Old Granddad Uhlan started the whole thing. A long time ago he served in the cavalry and ever since then he has had that nickname and a scar on his temple.

He's past a hundred. Nobody remembers how old he is, perhaps a hundred and eight or a hundred and ten.

The old man just cannot remember our names, he's seen so many boys grow up before his eyes. So he makes only two distinctions in our tribe. If a boy runs about barefoot, if his hair is a mane the colour of old straw and if he sticks his nose into every little thing that happens in the village then he is a Vaska. If the boy has a neat haircut, wears a hat and sandals, if his eyes are full of contempt and boredom, then he is an Alfred.

In the beginning of every summer the village is full of Alfreds who come here from the city for their vacations. They keep aloof like tourists from another planet. But towards autumn all the city boys get so used to village life and turn into such honest-to-goodness Vaskas it is a joy to see. But this particular Alfred never got rid of his Alfredness. He must be a pain in the neck in the city as well, and city boys must give him beatings, too. And doesn't he deserve them!

Still, I'm not going to start the story with him—not with that stinker! I'd rather first tell about our gang, about Stepka and Gurka.

Stepka is a local boy. Gurka only comes here for the summer holidays. He throws off his city

duds the moment he arrives and wears nothing but a pair of shorts all summer long. Our old women don't like that and call him a bare-kneed bum but he just shrugs them off:

"They're behind the times, the grannies. You must bake your skin through and through in the sun and have it seasoned in the wind, and then you'll be warm all winter."

Stepka, on the other hand, never parts with his trousers, not even on the hottest day, for fear he would lose his standing.

He is a bit stoop-shouldered, as though supporting a great weight on his back.

Gurka is a carefree chap. He is uncomplicated. He always says what he thinks.

We have yet another person in our gang, Lubka. She's a girl. I don't know much about her. In general, I find it hard to understand girls, and this one is even harder to understand than most.

Sometimes she's just like a boy. She runs about in shorts and a vest. She's so good at weeding you can never catch up with her. If it's hay-carting, she is up on the stack laying the hay, and this, let me tell you, is the hardest job of all. She can milk a cow as well as any grown-up. She knows some swear words that would make even boys blush. But sometimes she comes all queer. She'd put on her mother's yellow blouse, wind a string of rowan beads round her neck, stick flowers into her hair and walk along all dressed up like this, stopping at every puddle to admire herself.

"What are you staring into those puddles for?" we would ask her.

And she'd reply: "I want to see how I look against the sky."

And she would turn away from us and heave a big sigh. Perhaps she holds us in contempt a little. Girls are like that. Besides, we don't look all too smart. Our voices are hoarse. As for our conversation....

Lubka would sometimes watch us for a while, then shake her head and say reproachfully:

"Aren't you silly? No better than calves."

"Hey you, clever one, how much are the pots?" Gurka would retort.

Stepka never argues with her. He only quarrelled with Lubka once, and that was before Alfred came on the scene.

What do we do? We bathe in the river from morning till night, go to the woods for raspberries and mushrooms. We help with the haymaking and weeding. In the evenings we make raids on orchards. We do not consider our raids stealing. We rob all orchards, except, of course, the collective farm's because there is a watchman with a dog there. Also, we never touch Granddad Uhlan's orchard. It is the rule with us.

I remember one day. We were sitting on some logs crunching apples and feeling raw in the mouth from all the apples we had eaten.

"I say," said Stepka, "wouldn't it be fun to plant fruit-trees and flowers everywhere, on every little hummock. The earth would be as gay as one big flowerbed."

He threw the remains of an apple at a telegraph pole and the apple burst into little bits like a hand-grenade.

"Sure," Gurka replied. "That's how it'll be under communism."

He threw his own apple at the pole, too, and added in a surprised tone of voice: "In twenty years or so. Technology everywhere and orchards, too. Wouldn't it look swell?"

Lubka made a hole in the ground with her bare foot and laughed in a mirthless sort of way.

"Until that happens, I wish they'd build a club in our village sooner. And lay the streets with asphalt. Then we'd have neon signs flickering like the Northern Lights. I read somewhere that in future there'll be no villages, only agrocities."

"They won't let you live in one," somebody said.

Lubka flicked him a look and said sadly:

"I don't mind. I'm sick and tired of the lot of you. I want to be a pilot. D'you think I can, Nick? "

Nick is my name.

I said nothing, just shrugged my shoulders. I can't make her out, this girl.

Gurka answered her instead.

"Why not? There, see those goose feathers in the grass? Stick them in behind to make a steering tail and fly away with the wind."

The boys laughed, and some of the girls did too.

Stepka and I knew how hard Lubka's life really was. Her mother and father were forever at each other's throats. Her mother would turn him out of the house with a poker, and he would make straight for the shop or the bar. He would come back drunk and shout all kinds of obscenities

under their window. They even called him to the collective farm office and made him pay a fine for breach of order.

"Stop laughing," Stepka said.

He took the last apple out of Lubka's hand, swung his arm to dash it against the pole but changed his mind. Granddad Uhlan stood at the pole. He was poking in the heap of apple remains with his stick and shaking his beard. Then he lowered himself on his knees and began picking the seeds out of the cores.

"Hey you, come here and help! " he shouted to us. "Destroying all this fruit— doesn't the blighter have a heart? He deserves a charge of salt in his arse! "

We said nothing as we helped the old man to pick out the seeds. By and by he cheered up and said: "We'll plant them and they'll be just ready to bear apples by the time you have your own kids."

The girls all blushed and the boys turned away.

"Here," Granddad Uhlan went on, pointing at Stepka and Lubka, "the two of you may have a boy, Vaska. And you'll give him a sweet apple. There's no more joyful fruit on earth than the apple."

Lubka jumped up and tossed her pigtails.

"Me marrying this shaggy bear? He never said a nice word in his life! "

Granddad Uhlan looked at her, chuckled into his beard and walked off. He goes about with a stick, and his walk is slow, as though he's always listening for something. He stops in the middle of the meadow and stands there looking at the

flowers, the grasses and the dappled sunlight under the trees. He's like the forest, our Granddad Uhlan, sometimes he's stern and sometimes he lights up with a smile. And he always walks by himself.

Granddad Uhlan went off. Stepka waited for the shouting to subside and then said:

"Who do we steal from?—ourselves. What a lot! Each is only out to put his teeth into something. Has any one of you ever planted anything? "

"What about you? " Lubka shouted jumping up. "Aren't you like that yourself? So's Gurka! And Nick. And all of you! "

What a hullabaloo that started.

And Lubka's eyes narrowed like a cat's.

So did Stepka's. And his lips pressed into a thin line.

"Shut up, you! " he cried. "That goes for you, Lubka, as well."

"Who are you to order me about? Why do you listen to this shaggy cur? All he's good for is to bark out of his kennel! "

Stepka's eyes became mere slits. We all thought he would give Lubka a good clout Instead he suddenly smiled and said:

"Very well, so I bark. And they needn't listen to me. But if I find out that somebody has been frisking an orchard, I'll give him a working over with my own hands! Is that clear? "

Gurka chimed in:

"I don't live here and I don't have an orchard of my own, but I agree with Stepka. As for Lubka, she can stuff herself."

And so we decided: no more orchard robbing. The orchards were not planted for us to play around in. Anyway the same apples grew in all of them—from Granddad Uhlan's saplings.

Ever since that time, Lubka kept away from us. She would go to the dance and watch the big boys and girls dance to an accordion. We might not have existed for all the notice she took of us.

Well, I've told you all this in order to give you an idea how things stood. Now I'll tell you about Alfred.

He came to the village in summer. Actually, he was the grandson of one of our own women. It's amazing, when you think of it....

The day we made his acquaintance we were badly stung by the shore wasps on the river. Stepka had swollen lips and one eye closed. Gurka's both ears hung down as though frost-bitten and one cheek stuck out. I had it worse than anybody else—a wasp had stung me in the tongue. The others had rubbed their swellings with earth, which relieves the pain. But you can't rub your tongue with earth.

Near the village a tractor caught up with us. Gurka's uncle was driving it.

"My, don't you look pretty! " he cried laughing. "Who did that to you? "

"Wasps, who else," retorted Gurka.

"Want to smear some solid oil on it? " Gurka's uncle asked.

At that point we heard a voice behind our backs saying:

"You should use a repellent, then nobody would bite you."

We turned round.

Lubka stood by the ditch and with her was a strange boy in sporting shorts with a belt and a blue shirt.

"Look at him," Gurka's uncle said. "He knows everything." He let in the clutch and made off among clouds of dust.

The strange boy was laughing.

"What a joker, this tractor-driver."

"He's not a tractor-driver, he's the chief engineer," said Gurka.

"Very well then," said the boy. "Who's arguing? "

Stepka gave the two of them a look and then, all of a sudden, grabbed the new boy by the collar.

"Hey you, Alfred," he said. "What if I bash your mug in to celebrate our first meeting? "

The boy looked at Lubka from the corner of his eye and said bravely: "No, you won't. I know French boxing."

He took up a stance and started hopping about.

Gurka and I just couldn't understand why Stepka should be so rough with this particular Alfred.

"Dance away, Alfred. I have plenty of time," Stepka growled. "I love it when people dance for me. Show me some more."

The boy stopped hopping but still kept his fists at his chin. Stepka walked round him and asked, "Don't you hit in the ear in French boxing? "

"No, you don't."

"Then I'll bash you the Russian way," said Stepka and swung his arm. But Lubka stood between the two of them.

"Don't you dare hit him just because you don't know what to do with those hams of yours! "

At this point Gurka joined the conversation.

"Aren't you making too much of yourself, Lubka? " he said. "I can't understand why Stepka doesn't give you a what-not. In his place I'd begin with you, not with Alfred."

'"Cause he dassn't," Lubka said and shrugged a shoulder. "You're savages, the lot of you. No culture at all. You too, Gurka, for all that you are from Leningrad."

She gave Alfred a nod as much as to say: come on, no point in chewing the rag with these characters.

We three stood for a long time by the fence they put up round the village so that the cattle don't get into the fields at night.

Stepka was twitching the eyebrow over his swollen eye. He looked like Genghiz Khan.

"Why did you go for that smartie?" asked Gurka.

"I don't know.... I didn't like his kisser."

As a matter of fact, Alfred was quite a good-looking chap. I know that looks are not everything. Still, it's a nice thing to be handsome. Even my own mother sometimes tells me: "Oh God, don't you look terrible! Look at yourself in the mirror. Why have I been punished like this? "

Why should I look in the mirror? Let Lubka look at herself in the mirror— because she's pretty. I know I look like my father and I'm proud

of it. My father fought in the war and was wounded four times. He has six decorations. And now he's chairman of our collective farm. For all that he's not handsome.

Towards evening we saw Lubka and Alfred again. They were playing football.

Lubka was standing in the old gate which used to lead into the smithy and was big enough for a cart to pass. Now we have a new smithy, built of brick, at the other end of the village. The old one here, with log walls and caved-in roof, is overgrown with nettles, thick and stingy. They say if you wear socks made out of nettles-fibre, they'll cure you of rheumatism. Only I have yet to see someone prepared to knit such socks.

Naturally we stopped to see whether Alfred was much of a footballer.

He prepared to kick the ball like a real master of sports. He placed a pebble on the ball to aim the better, took a run and sent it plumb into the gate, right under the top bar. A good kick if I ever saw one.

Lubka leapt, but missed the ball and fell down. The ball landed in the nettles behind her back.

"Well," Alfred said to Lubka laughing, "you missed it, go and get it now."

Lubka went into the nettles. And then we noticed that her legs and arms were covered with red blotches. The poor kid was stung all over.

Stepka was silent. Gurka said dismally:

"Come on, if she likes rummaging in the nettles, let her."

Stepka never budged or said a word, he just clenched his teeth hard.

I came up to Alfred.

"Leave off Lubka, will you! Whoever plays football with a girl? Tormenting her like that too."

"Nobody's tormenting her," Alfred answered with a grin. "And this is not football either. It's a new game called 'Blame yourself. You miss and get the ball out of the nettles. When she catches it, I'll take her place in the goal. And then I'll have to get it out of the nettles. It's all fair as fair."

Again he made a run and hit the ball.

This time Lubka caught it. She pressed it to her chest and showed us her tongue, as though it was our fault that she had got stung by the nettles.

We watched to see what would follow.

Alfred stood in the goal, legs wide apart, hands at the ready. Lubka put the ball into position, caught her pigtails in her teeth, took a run. and gave the ball a mighty kick with her big toe, flopping on the ground with pain. The ball whistled over Alfred's head and landed in the very thickness of the nettles.

Stepka and Gurka grinned happily. Me, too, from ear to ear.

"Go and get it, Alfred, since you invented this silly game."

Lubka gave us a glare and suddenly shouted:

"What's this to you? What're you standing here for? Go away! "

She rose from the ground and hopped towards Alfred on one foot. Her face was all screwed up—she must've hurt her big toe badly against the ball.

"Don't get worked up, Lubka," said Alfred and went to get the ball.

He whistled as he made his way through the nettles as though they were so many lilies-of-the-valley. He picked up the ball, tossed it into the air and caught it without getting out of the nettles. When he returned we stared at his legs in disbelief. There wasn't a single blotch. And Lubka laughed at us, twiddling her hurt toe:

"Here's where you get off! Ha-ha-ha! "

Off we went.

Some time later we saw Alfred by himself, washing his legs in the ditch. He'd pass a wet handkerchief over a leg, and it would cover in foam.

"He's soaped his legs! " cried Gurka.

Stepka made straight for Alfred.

"So you soaped your legs before starting that game? " he demanded.

"Sure," Alfred replied gaily. "Why should I have my legs stung by nettles? I'm no fool."

"And Lubka is a fool then? "

"Of course she's a fool. But she has her uses—the world'd be very dull if there were no fools in it."

Stepka paused, then asked, quite calmly, even with a kind of curiosity.

"Tell me, Alfred, what do you eat? "

"That's a funny question. What d'you want to know it for?"

Stepka answered with a grim smile:

"I'm simply curious to know what cads like you fatten on."

Alfred jumped up, took up his position, again, fists to his chin, but all the time his eyes darted here and there looking for a way of escape.

"Three to one, is it? Just you dare...."

Stepka gave him the once-over and screwed his face up.

My fists itched so much you would have thought I'd picked the ball out of the nettles with my own hands. Why d'you think I did not have it out with Alfred that time? Certainly not because I was afraid of his French boxing school.

The next day I saw them together again. I was just out for a walk, that's all. When I walked past Lubka's house I saw them. They didn't see me because there are raspberry bushes as tall as a man growing across the road. They're young and don't bear berries yet, but they're handy for hiding. Lubka was chopping up green cabbage leaves for the piglets. You chop these leaves in a wooden trough, then add some bran and whatever else you have handy, left-over porridge, crusts of bread and the like, mixing them all up in warm water to make a troughful of the pigs' favourite dish.

The chopper in Lubka's hand went up and down like the needle in the sewing machine and made an even stitch from one end of the trough to the other. Lubka is a neat worker.

Alfred was standing nearby watching her. Then he wiped his hands and said: "Let me try."

"You'll get dirty," Lubka answered. "No need for you to sully yourself in our dirt."

"Never mind the dirt. I want to show you how to do it properly."

Lubka gave him the chopper.

"Very well, Shurik," she said, "have a go."

So Alfred's name was Shurik. Look at Lubka, I thought, gone all polite, and shuriking him. She used to run about barefoot all through the summer, like everybody else, and her heels would be black and cracked. The one thing she did to pretty herself up was put bright ribbons in her pigtails. And now—how'd you like that?—she was wearing shoes with buttons. The ribbons were much the same though, but that's simply because there just aren't any brighter ribbons.

Alfred came up to the wooden trough, placed one foot on the edge so that it wouldn't rock and let go with the chopper. It got stuck in the bottom and he couldn't pull it out at once.

"You bit it too hard," Lubka said. "Let me show you. You don't need to put any strength into it at all."

"It was just a trial hit," growled Alfred.

I seethed behind my bush as I watched him. If you can't do something, ask people to show you.

Alfred pulled out the chopper at last and rattled away with it, hitting one and the same place all the time.

"Move the chopper along," Lubka said.

"I know, keep your advice to yourself."

Alfred swung the chopper again and drove it into his own foot. It made me feel bad behind my bush, as though I had pushed him on purpose.

Alfred flopped down on the ground and clutched his foot. His teeth were chattering. Then he grabbled the chopper and flung it away.

Lubka stood stock-still, her eyelashes trembling. Big drops of tears were rolling from her eyelashes onto her nose. She had always been afraid of blood. When I ripped my hand open last spring against some barbed wire, she cried too. She did not even offer to bandage the wound with a handkerchief. She gets all dizzy when she sees blood. So I had to tighten the handkerchief with my teeth. Well, I thought, it seems it's time I got out of my hiding place. Alfred or no, he will need some first aid. Perhaps he is bleeding badly. Suddenly I saw Lubka get down on her knees saying, "Take off the shoe, Shurik."

Alfred went on rattling his teeth. Blood was flowing between his toes.

Lubka squeezed her eyes shut, took off his shoe and sock and put a plaintain leaf on the wound. Then she ran inside, brought a scoop of water, a bottle of stickies and a clean linen cloth.

Almost every household in our village keeps a bottle of stickies. The grannies will pick some birch buds early in spring and infuse them in vodka—and there you have your medicine. It is called the stickies because the buds stick to your hands in spring. They have just burst and show the green leaf edge and their smell fair fills the whole village.

Lubka washed the foot and poured some stickies from the bottle onto the wound. Alfred howled—those stickies burn worse than iodine.

"Never mind, it'll pass in a minute," Lubka comforted him, bandaging his foot with the cloth.

Alfred stood up and made a few hops on his good leg. Lubka picked up his shoe and handed it to him. The strap had been cut through by the blade. In my opinion that strap saved his foot. If not for it he wouldn't be doing much hopping now.

Alfred snatched the shoe and threw it aside.

"What are you giving it me for? It's no good now. Making me spoil a perfectly good shoe! "

Lubka picked up the shoe again and said:

"It can be mended quite easily. All you need is sew the strap together." I could see she was nearly crying.

"Sew it then;" Alfred shouted. "All the same it won't be a new shoe any more, but a mended one."

Had I been in Lubka's place, I'd give Alfred a clout on the head with that shoe. But Lubka just stood there with her head hung low as though she was really to blame. It made me so mad I got out of the bushes and walked away. Not to pass that blighter I decided to go by "way of the orchard.

The trees were hung with apples, but I paid them no attention. They were as green as green. Really and truly, I never gave those apples a glance. And Lubka's father, Uncle Nikolai had no call to pull my ears—I never touched one single apple.

For a few days after that we never met Lubka or Alfred for our gang was busy with something really worth while.

The collective farm chairman gave us an old Belarus tractor and let us use the old smithy. We

cleaned the smithy, mended its roof and mowed down the nettles. The ground there smelled of charcoal and iron. It looked fine, the green grass, the blue sky, the black smithy and the red tractor on high wheels.

Well, after we put everything in order and got the tractor ready, we received our first assignment—to carry manure from the cattle-sheds to the hot-beds. We loaded two platforms with manure, hitched the tractor on and rolled off through the village. Stepka had specially asked for this job, as a matter of fact. To us he said, "Those who don't want to do it needn't. There are no dirty or clean jobs in agriculture."

There weren't any shirkers. What's wrong with manure? We could always go to the river and wash afterwards.

Then my turn to drive the tractor came.

There I was, at the controls in the cab, and the rest of the gang walked behind, making a lot of noise and generally being very jolly. Suddenly I saw Lubka standing by the roadside in shoes and white socks. She was by herself, no Alfred in sight. I turned away as though I hadn't noticed her, thinking the while: "There, watch me drive a tractor! " Suddenly Lubka put her hands to her mouth and shouted: "Hey, Nick, dung-beetle, what are you so high and mighty about? "

I pretended I hadn't heard her.

"Why don't you come and work with us, Lubka? " Stepka asked. "See, they gave us a tractor. And work to do."

"Work away then. Work breaks horses' backs." Lubka tossed her head and the ribbons in her

pigtails shone like polished brass. She stopped her nose with her fingers. "Ugh, the stench! At last you've found yourself a job to fit your cultural level."

"Listen to the dainty lady! " the boys protested. "You'd think she's never come near a cow herself! "

Stepka shushed them up and went on calmly, in a kind of pleading tone:

"They'll give us another job when we're done with this one. Want to have a look at the tractor? "

"What do I want with your stupid tractor? " Lubka replied. "Work is for fools."

"Now, Lubka, you're repeating someone else's words."

Lubka hung her head and said in a low voice:

"What d'you want me for? There's a lot of you. You don't want me I'm sure."

And Stepka asked her, also in a low voice:

"What's happened to you, Lubka? "

"Nothing's happened to her! Simply she's sweet on that Alfred of hers! " shouted Gurka with a laugh.

I rose in my seat to see better. I never expected Lubka to let that go. She's as good a fighter as any one of us. But she turned away and ran off into a side-street.

"Sweetie-sweet! " the kids yelled after her. "Alfred's sweetheart! "

"Sweetie-sweet! " I shouted too. Only Stepka never said a word. He came up to me, and poked his fist into my leg.

"Stop that yelling, will you! Get along."

After the carting of manure we were told to take some poles to the river-bank. They were building a big pen for pigs there. Then we carted sand, straw and anything else that we were strong enough to load.

The apples were ripening in the orchards. And with them our hatred for Alfred ripened too. If you ask me why we hated him so I can't even tell. He never played any dirty tricks on any of the gang.

All he did was swim in the river, cycle about in Lubka's company, lay in the hammock and fish. When we came to the river to wash off our work sweat and dust, he walked off whistling, without giving us a glance. Once, when Stepka stepped on his shirt, he said, quite pleasantly: "Excuse me, may I take my shirt? "

Another time, when Gurka dived down and tied his line to a snag, he just cut it off with a knife and walked off smiling.

Lubka, on seeing us, crossed to the other side of the street or turned into a side-street.

Things might have remained at this stage until the end of summer, if not for a certain development.

One morning we were all sprawling on the grass near our tractor by the smithy waiting for Stepka to bring us our assignment from the farm board. The morning sun made us all drowsy, tickling our cheeks as though with a soft feather. When you lie in the sun doing nothing, you always feel sleepy.

Suddenly all the kids raised their heads. Granddad Uhlan was making for the smithy. He

leaned his weight on a stick he held in one hand, and in another he lugged a big branch from an apple-tree. It was hard work for him, pulling that branch. His knees shook and his head shook too.

Granddad Uhlan glanced over our faces, as though looking for someone.

"Heathens, that's what you are," he said. "Alfreds, every one of you."

At that moment Stepka walked up. He saw the apple bough in the old man's hand and grasped the situation at once.

"We never did it, Granddad," he said.

Granddad Uhlan pushed him away with his stick.

"Heathens, every one of you," he muttered. "Empty seed, that's what you are. Chaff...."

And the old man began to weep. He was very old. He didn't even have the strength to beat us with his stick. We wouldn't have resisted, to let him get it off his chest. But he turned and walked off. He tried to walk fast, but his legs did not obey him. They only shook all the more, without quickening his steps.

"Who did it? " Stepka asked.

The kids kept silent.

"Who did it? " Stepka asked once again and then started asking each one in turn.

At this point Gurka became angry and cried out: "What's this third degree for? We told you we didn't do it, and we didn't. Whoever'd rob Uhlan's orchard? "

"Nor would anybody," Stepka agreed. "Nobody ever robbed his orchard."

Suddenly Gurka had a brainwave.

"It's Alfred, that's who! "

"Alfred, sure it's him! " the kids clamoured. "Let's go and get him."

"Wait," Stepka stopped us. "We must catch him red-handed."

"I pity you, Alfred," I thought.

All day long we worked on our tractor carting peat. Towards night we went to our posts, each in a different orchard. Stepka and I took up a position inside Granddad Uhlan's orchard. There we crouched in the bushes until it became quite dark.

The nights are quiet in our village. We could hear the logs in the walls crackling softly as they gave off the day's heat, the cows chewing their cud, the chickens scratching themselves on their perches. We could hear the heart-rending sound of a far-away locomotive.

For nothing better to do I started composing a song:

All Alfreds are swine,
All Alfreds are rats,
No Alfred gets off....

We caught nobody that night, nor the next night either. But on our third vigil we heard somebody push the wattles apart in the fence and call us softly: "Hey, Stepka! "

It was Igor, a very small kid, the son of a stableman. He put his head into Uhlan's garden and whispered: "Come, I've seen Alfred."

We leaped over the fence like a pair of goats and loped after Igor. The boy couldn't run very

fast and so Stepka, in his impatience, caught him up and put him on his back.

We entered Igor's yard and he led us to the fence which came out onto a side-street, moved a board aside and whispered: "There he is, look."

We could see the whole of the side-street through the chink. There was a full moon. Alfred was standing very quietly in the shadow of a fence. And it was the fence of ... Stepka's orchard.

Stepka clenched his fists. "Waiting his moment, the rat! Go and fetch the other kids."

Soon a whole crowd of us gathered in Igor's garden. We waited for Alfred to get over the fence and some even urged him on in whispers, "Come on, you swine, climb in! "

Suddenly somebody jumped down from the fence.

"Lubka?"

Yes, it was she. She took an apple from the bosom of her frock and gave it to Alfred.

Alfred leaned against the fence, champed at the apple and whispered something to Lubka with a giggle. At that moment the whole crowd of us leaped over the fence and all but dropped on their heads: "So here you are, sweeties! "

Alfred dropped his apple and his eyes darted here and there. But we made a semi-circle in front of him and there was no way of escape.

Stepka grabbed Alfred by the throat.

"Did you break the apple-tree in Granddad Unlan's garden, you so-and-so?" He glanced round at Lubka and caught himself up, ashamed of having sworn in her presence.

I was looking at Lubka. In the moonlight all people seem pale, but Lubka's face looked whiter than her teeth. Her frock was belted tight and over the belt her bosom was full of apples.

Stepka gave Alfred another shake.

"Come on, confess you ruined Granddad Uhlan's apple-tree, you! " "I don't know anything about any apple-trees," Alfred mumbled in reply. "I'm no thief. I never set my foot in orchards."

Stepka raised his fist preparing to give him a whack. Alfred caught at his fist. "What are you going to beat me for? Beat Lubka, if you must. It was she who stole apples from Granddad Unlan. And from your garden, too...." Alfred dashed up to Lubka and tore at her belt.

Apples rolled to Lubka's feet as though he had shaken a tree. Big choice apples. "Why don't you hit her then? " Alfred asked. He looked round at us and winked, his mouth twisted.

"Hey, kids, I know why he doesn't beat Lubka. It's because he's...."

"Hukh," Stepka breathed out and hit Alfred in the mouth. Alfred slumped, his face landing in these very apples. I came up to Lubka.

"Why did you go and rob that orchard? Didn't we agree that we wouldn't? "

"What's it to you? " she said in a hollow voice. "All right, beat me."

She stood motionless, without even picking up her belt.

Now Gurka came up.

"So we will. Don't imagine we're going to let you off. It's time you were...."

At this point Stepka rushed forward, and stood shielding Lubka with his body. He became as white as Lubka herself and he stood at the ready, prepared to give battle to the whole lot of us.

"See," screamed Alfred, picking himself up from the ground and wiping blood away from his mouth. "He's in love with this Lubka! Isn't it a laugh! "

Lubka never said a word. Then she whispered inaudibly: "Let me go, please."

We parted to make way for her. I picked up her shoes which were lying in the grass by the fence and pushed them into her hands. She took them and made off down the side-street.

We followed her with our eyes. She must have become aware of our glances because she turned round.

"Kids...," she said, then pressed her white socks to her eyes and burst out sobbing.

That brought us out of our trance.

"Let's give it to the stinker! " Gurka shouted.

You know the rest.

That's all. I only want to add that ever since that summer Alfred became the worst name one could call a chap in our village.

PAYING YOUR DEBTS

It is a stern land. Rocks. Trees crippled by the frost cling together. They not squeak in the wind, they do not complain. They are silent, stubborn and firm. The polar sea spreads the wet sails of its fogs over the hills.

Ice. Night. Blue snow.

People with dismal hearts cannot stand this land for more than a year. Their hearts become soggy with rain, shrivelled with cold and fear. Forgetting honour and comrades they run back to the cities where the walls bear a hundred layers of wall-paper. But this story is not about them. This story is about jolly boys and girls, about fair weather and a twelve-year-old boy by the name of Pashka.

It was late May. The night had flown off to the other pole. The day shift was walking home. The night shift was hurrying for work. The town canteen was packed full of lovers of steaks and goulashes. Local people never suffer from loss of appetite, and if somebody says he's not hungry, as likely as not he simply has no money for more food.

In hostel recreation rooms radiograms were already wheezing away in their fickle way. In family flats jets of hot water were hitting the white enamel of the baths. Those who held that sleep never hurt anybody were already casting longing glances at their beds, ready to hit the pillow.

It was at that late hour that a strange boy made his appearance in the little town.

His shaggy hat seemed to have just emerged from a dog fight, its wounds still raw and unlicked. His quilted jacket with a yellow seal collar had four buttons from a woman's coat. The huge fishermen's top-boots reached up to the top of his thighs. He seemed to be riding astride them unhurriedly through the spring mud, having entrusted them with his fate. The raw sticky wind had polished the boy's cheeks until they shone crimson.

There were no boys of his age in the town. There were, to be sure, babies born to local newlyweds, but these infants did not even know whether they were boys or girls. The only people who knew these particulars were they: parents and the nurses in the creche.

The first man to catch sight of the strange boy was Roman Pankevich. They used to call him Romka before, but now that he was married even his bosom friend, with whom he was at the vocational school, with whom he saved money for his first good suit and with whom he shared a plank bed in a tent, sleeping under two blankets and two quilted jackets, no longer called him by that familiar appellation. Before long Roman would graduate from a correspondence course at the All-Union Industrial Institute and they would start calling him Roman Adamovich.

Roman gave the boy a curious glance.

By his tired face and the heavy walk he could tell the boy had come from afar. The stubborn glint in his eyes and the severe wrinkle between

his eyebrows told him that the boy was prepared to walk as much again if the need arose.

Memories long past stabbed at Roman's heart. He imagined for a moment that it was himself, wet and hungry, trudging through the mud to a new life. Roman shook his head and said:

"Shoo, vanish, spectre! "

The boy stopped.

"Have you been drinking or what? " the shaggy hat demanded hoarsely. "Where will I find the chief? "

"One finds the chief by the plate on his door," Roman replied, "and, mind you, people rarely seek him out of their own accord." Roman's thoughts must have been miles away because he stepped from the porch right into the mud with no thought for his well-polished shoes. He stood gazing at the strange boy for a long time, rubbing his freshly shaven bluish cheek.

The heavy top-boots moved forward a step or two.

"If you can't tell me, then get out of the way," their owner growled.

The boy's voice was hollow and fear lurked behind the stubborn glint in his eyes. All of this was familiar to Roman. He did not move out of the way. Instead he said:

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, or I can take you to the militia station, you know."

Roman waited for the boy's answer. But the top-boots went on, step by step, and the boy's eyes did not change their expression in the least. Then Roman grabbed the boy by his sealskin collar, pulled him out of the mud, boots and all,

and set him down on the steps in front of the house.

"Let's have a chat. What is it you want with the chief? "

"Let go," the boy protested, wriggling, "you'll tear my collar off. Let go, hear! "

Roman pushed the boy into the entrance hall and pressed him up against the radiator.

"Thaw out a bit first and then we'll see. Perhaps we'll get as far as the chief in the end."

Roman's physique fitted the mighty excavator on which he worked. The muscles piled up under his flannel jacket were as hard as cobblestones.

"You have no right to detain me," said the boy.

"And you have no right to sneak about in the frontier zone. Show me your papers."

The boy pushed forward one of the boots and tapped on the floor with its tip.

"Aren't you a smart one," he said scornfully. "You show me your p-papers first."

The boy stuttered badly.

Roman slapped him on the shaggy cap and, to dispel mutual suspicions, grasped hold of him by the quilted jacket below the collar and by his pants, lifted him into the air and carried him up the stairs.

The boy hammered with his fists on Roman's legs and tried to catch at the railings with his boots. The railings clanged. The boy yelled, "Let go, d'you hear! "

Roman gave him a shake from time to time:

"Stop the yelling, will you. You're not a baby."

At the first floor landing Roman knocked at a door with his foot, and when the door was opened, carried the boy inside.

"Look what I've brought in, Anya," he said to a small woman who looked on these goings on with something akin to horror. "What is your name now? "

"Suppose it's Pashka, so what? Let me be, will you? "

Anya wrinkled her nose.

"Don't take him into the room, please. Look at all the mud on him." She came up to Pashka, lifted his chin unceremoniously and turned his face to the light.

Pashka made to butt her in the stomach, but was sent crashing into a corner by a mighty push.

"Don't you dare hit Anya," Roman said threateningly. "We're expecting a son."

"Go and look for your snotty son then and let me be. I never wanted to come to your place."

Roman waited for Pashka to pick himself up from the floor and then gave him a shove in the direction of the bathroom.

"There's no point in looking for our son, he's simply not got born yet. So don't you dare lay a finger on Anya. Take off your jacket, I'll take it to the drying room later on."

Roman pulled the cap off Pashka's head and then asked a question which doesn't often get asked these days: "Your hair doesn't crawl, does it? "

"Why should it crawl? "

"Don't you know why? You've never seen little insects who move their legs like this? " Again Roman remembered his own wartime childhood.

Pashka blushed and his upper lip quivered.

"Don't talk nonsense! I went to the bath-house before I started out."

"Just as you like. You can take a bath if you like."

Anya screwed up her nose again and gave her husband a questioning look.

Roman took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his checked shirt.

Pashka glanced at his arms and said with a sigh, "Strong-arm, are you? "

"That's right," Roman admitted. "Anya, please go and fetch Zina. I'll stand watch meanwhile."

"Why did you have to bring him here? " Anya said grumpily. "Talking back, too. Take him to the militia station. He may be a thief for all we know."

"Go and fetch Zina," Roman repeated in a low voice.

Anya wrapped herself in a shawl and went out, casting a hostile look at Pashka.

"Better stay and see that I don't steal your traps," Pashka said after her.

"Enough of your cheek," Roman ordered him. "Take off the jacket. Come on, take it off. Look how we've mucked up the floor." Roman brought a rag and mopped the floor. Then he pushed the boy into the kitchen and made him sit at a table covered with a blue oilcloth.

"Why d'you keep pushing me about? " Pashka flared up. "Am I your nephew or what? "

"That's right," Roman calmly confirmed. "Sit down on this here stool. And tell me where you're on the lam from? "

"You're all wrong. There's no chance of going on the lam these days. There's militia everywhere. I'm from hereabouts. Know Treshchakovo District? Well, I'm from a fishing cooperative there."

Pashka flopped down on the stool, stretching his legs in the boots before him insolently. Minus his quilted jacket and cap, he looked thinner, taller and younger— about thirteen. But his troubled look and folds on both sides of the mouth added another year or two.

"Have you got a mother? "

"Sure. It's not because I'm an orphan that I came here."

"Father? "

Pashka floundered. His stutter was quite bad. When the unwieldy sounds got stuck to his mouth, he shook his head as though to shake them out.

"D-d-dad, you say? I have no d-d-dad now."

At this point Pashka stopped talking. He stared at the walls, the curtains, the gleaming new pans. His eyes misted with sleepiness. From time to time he started, turned his face to the window pursing his lips tensely. Roman put a kettle on, and took two mugs, some bread, sausage and sugar out of the cupboard.

"Come, get some tucker inside yourself. Zina will be here in a moment. She's our Komsomol secretary. You said you must talk to the chief, didn't you? "

Pashka took a squint at the food, his throat twitched and his lips pursed still tighter.

"Fall to," Roman said. "I have an idea your stomach must be as empty as outer space."

Pashka cast another glance at the food and asked in a whisper:

"What's your job?"

"I work on the excavator."

"The one that stands in the pit? "

"Yes."

"I thought so. It's a whopping big machine. Would it beat a tank? Without shooting, that is? " Pashka's glance lingered on the sausage and his legs moved back nearer the stool. "They sell sausage at Treshchakovo too now. They didn't use to. Only canned fish. And who wants to eat canned fish in a fishing cooperative? We have lots of fresh fish...."

Roman cut off a thick chunk of bread, put on top of it a slice of cold butter almost as thick and topped off the structure with several juicy round slices of sausage.

"Tuck in."

Pashka took the sandwich gingerly into his hands and breathed in the pungent smell of garlic. The veins in his neck tightened where grown men have their Adam's apple.

"Look here," he said. "Suppose I tell you everything and then you pass it on to that secretary female. I don't like to be sermonised. It makes me mad."

"You eat," said Roman, and poured him a mugful of strong tea, putting in four lumps of sugar and pushing the mug towards the boy.

Pashka munched away as he told his story.

"We live in Treshchakovo District. About a hundred kilometres from here, perhaps even more. I hitched a ride about half the way. If I'd walked the whole of it I'd know for certain. Our cooperative fishes for herring, cod, salmon, lancet fish, halibut. Have you ever tasted halibut? It's as good as sausage, honest? My mother is a member of the cooperative. She mends the nets, attaches the floats and such like. Before, when we didn't have a cannery, she used to work as a salter. Now it's only small jobs now and then. The men go fishing, nat'rally, it's a man's job. Sailing the seiners and dories. Well, and the women, nat'rally, look after the house. Sometimes they help when the catch is extra big. Mum has three of us kids. We all need clothes...." Pashka swallowed a mouthful and added with a sigh. "The smallest is six, and we are all good eaters. When we get up from the table you won't find a crumb left. There aren't even any flies in our house. They say it's the climate that develops the appetite. The air is something special here. Have you noticed? " Pashka took another sandwich. He was now talking more slowly, with frequent stops, evidently approaching the crux of the matter.

"Mum has rheumatism in her hands now. The chairman gave her a lighter job—to clean up the office and carry messages and packages. She cried at night after he told her about it. They put me down for an old woman, she says. The next morning I went to the chairman and demanded that he take me on in a fishing team. Ain't I a

member of the cooperative? And he told me there is no such law as would allow him to send me out to sea. He said I was too young. It's not like potato digging, he said. They can't put you on the ship's roll.

"I got angry then and shouted at him: 'You put me on a team, goatbeard, or my mother will get real sick.' Well, he kicked me out, of course. Later he came to our house himself. He used to go out to sea with Mum's father. Didn't he shout at me! 'You salted spawn, pop-eyed fry! We can send your mother to a health-home to cure her hands. But no one will allow me to send such a punk out to sea....' "

Roman listened to Pashka's tale, frowning and jerking his heavy shoulders from time to time, then recollected himself and made several more sandwiches for the boy.

"Come on, tuck in. No need to hurry though."

Pashka, forgetting his manners, bit off half a sandwich at one go.

"Then I went to the chairman of the Executive Committee in Treshchakovo. Her name is Anna Trofimovna Zubareva. 'Churkin is a darned bureaucrat,' I tells her. 'Send him a paper to make him take me on.' She walked up and down her office for a while. Her sons died on Rybachi during the war, so I reckoned she might help me. But she sat down at her desk and told me, 'I can send you to a boarding school in Murmansk, Pashka, but I can't do a thing about work. The boarding school is a new form of social-1-list education, and you'll grow up a useful person. And we shall help your mother from public funds.'

I respect her very much, this Anna Trofimovna, but I told her point-blank that I was a useful person without any of their silly boarding-schools. Mum started to cry when she found out about it. 'Why did you have to disgrace me? ' she said. 'We have enough food, and we have clothes on our backs, we'll manage for another two years, until you are big enough to start working. They may think I'm making you do it...." Pashka stopped munching, took a sip of the tea that had cooled by now and whispered, leaning towards Roman:

"I must tell you this about Mum. She has to hold a spoon in her fist, and as for taking a needle and darning the young one's stockings, she just can't make her fingers hold together. My sister Verka does these things. She's eleven, our Verka. Mum doesn't let us tell anybody how ill she is. She can't have people pitying her. She's proud."

Pashka bent still nearer to Roman and whispered almost inaudibly:

"I'll tell you another thing about Mum. She's young. She's grown old on account of us three. See? " The stool squeaked under Pashka. The boy straightened up, and sat silently for a while, jerking his head significantly from time to time. Then he looked at his unwieldy boots and said with a note of surprise in his voice, "The chairman, Churkin, gave me these boots. He doesn't need them anyway. He's got an artificial leg."

Roman glanced at Pashka's boots too.

"Where's your father?" he asked in a hollow voice. "What happened to your father?"

"I have no idea. He was one of those seasonal workers. Churkin says they're a worthless lot, grabbers and loafers every one of them. Some, he says, make a profession of signing contracts. They'll sign on for anything as long as there's a chance of earning good money. It's money they're after. This lot built the cannery in Treshchakovo. Then they built some storehouses of foam concrete. When they were through, Churkin offered Dad a job in the cooperative. Our men make good money fishing. 'Nat'rally fishing is a dangerous work. So Dad said. 'I must first go to my home town of Kolpinsk.' It's somewhere near Leningrad."

"Kolpino," Roman corrected him.

"That's right. Well, off he went. Then he sent Mum a letter. Six pages. Explaining how he was a born wanderer and the wide-open spaces just drew him like a magnet.... People say he shoved off to Kamchatka."

"Does he pay alimony? "

"He would, if they could find him."

Pashka spoke straightforwardly and unashamedly, concealing nothing and adding nothing to his narrative. That meant his mother had not been lying to her children about their father and also that people in their village had not been scoffing at other people's trouble.

When Anya came back, followed by a tall girl in a short fur coat and several hulking young men in quilted jackets, Pashka lowered his eyes. He fidgeted about on his stool for a few seconds and then sat still.

Roman stood up and said to the girl, with a nod at Pashka:

"He's looking for a job in our town, Zina. As hard as they come, this young fellow."

Roman pulled a chair over for Zina.

The young men stared at Pashka's top-boots. Zina unbuttoned her coat, sat down, and gave Pashka a prickly glance. Anya must have vented her displeasure on the way.

"Out with it then."

Pashka shook his head.

"I've d-d-done with talking. I can show you my d-d-documents, that's all." He produced a birth certificate and a paper testifying to his having finished his sixth year at school. Roman gave Zina a significant glance to imply that she should leave the boy alone and give him a chance to get used to them. The girl looked at Pashka's papers and, for some reason, put them into her pocket.

"Now, there is no need to get so worked up," she said placatingly.

"I'm not worked up," Pashka said glumly. "I stutter because a bear licked me."

Zina stared at Pashka. The young men who had come in with her began moving the chairs noisily and finally arranged themselves round the table, their heads propped on their arms. Even Anya sat down on the window-sill.

"What d'you mean a bear licked you? " she asked.

"Just that he licked me. With his tongue."

Roman was standing by the wall, his powerful arms folded on his chest. He knew that all

people, no matter what they have achieved in life, yearn for their childhood, whether happy or not.

Pashka shrank on his stool miserably.

"What are you staring at me for? " he suddenly exploded. "Am I a fossil mammoth or what? "

The Komsomol chaps only spread their elbows wider on the table. Zina the secretary put a piece of sugar into her mouth. Anya, Roman's wife, pleaded:

"Tell us about the bear, we're dying to know."

Her tone was so full of frank curiosity and wonder that Pashka's frown cleared up by itself.

"Want to hear a story, you have to pay for it," he muttered, but, obviously remembering the sandwiches, threw a glance at Roman over his shoulder.

"Shall I tell them then? "

"Sure," Roman replied. "They're all good sorts."

Pashka shook his head for a while, trying to push the first stubborn sounds out of his mouth and then began with his favourite word which must have been the easiest to slide through Pashka's stiff lips.

"Nat'rally, I was a small kid then. Our village women used to make some extra money on cowberries. They would take toothed wooden scoops and gather as much as fifty kilos each. My mother used to take me along. She'd put me under a bush on a shawl and herself pick the berries round that bush. Well, one day she comes over to see how I was doing and sees a bear licking me. I was half choked by then for bears have foul breath. They say I was hammering him

on the head with my fists, but he just snorted. He liked playing with me. He even gave me a shove with his paw now and then to make me kick out all the harder. Mum just about screamed her head off when she saw it. And bears, nat'rally, can't stand women's screaming. He roared at Mum to shut up, but she threw the basket with the cowberries into his muzzle and went on screaming. Then the other women came running, thinking she'd been bitten by a snake, and when they saw the bear they raised a proper shebang. Our fisherwomen are a tough lot, even polar bears are afraid of their screaming. The men say a polar bear goes under, drowns to death as soon as they start their noise. Well, the bear, nat'rally, made off into the bushes. But it isn't on account of that bear that I began to stutter."

"Not on account of him? I'd die with fright on the spot," Anya said, closing her eyes shut and shaking her head.

"No, that happened later, when I was bigger. That first time I was so small a bear was the same as a cow to me. I only started screaming when Mum began. After that kids used to tease me with the bear. The boys would shout to me in the street, 'Pashka, look, there's a bear behind! ' They say I jumped out of my skin each time. Then the boys left off me. Their mothers cuffed their ears for them. Well, once my Dad was staying at home on sick-leave, I think he had a boil on his neck. And I started bawling. He swore at me and slapped me and still I went on bawling. I had pains in my stomach. So Dad went into the passage, turned a sheepskin coat inside out, put

it on and crawled into the room on all fours roaring like a bear. That was when it happened. They say I passed out with fright. And then I began to stutter...."

The young men sitting round the table frowned. What was there to say? Zina the secretary was twiddling the tea-pot lid in her fingers.

"I'd hit the stupid brute with a log," Anya said from her window-sill with a sob.

Roman put on his skiing jacket and said to the company:

"Let's go and talk it over, chaps. Let Pashka stay with us for the time being, Anya, what d'you say? "

"Sure," said Anya

The Komsomol group decided to let Pashka stay on the construction site till autumn and in autumn send him to a boarding school. During the school holidays they'd let him work with them and teach him some building trade. Zina listened to the discussion, sometimes putting in a "yes, but" and when the boys decided that Pashka was to begin working straightaway as an assembly apprentice at the concentrating mill she pulled the Labour Code from her desk which said succinctly that child labour is prohibited by Soviet law. Only fifteen-year-olds were allowed to work, and then only four hours a day.

"See? " Zina said. "How are we going to get round it?"

"We'll go and talk it over with the trade union committee."

The next day Roman went to the trade union committee. He knew everybody in town and everybody knew him.

"Hello, Igor," Roman said to the committee chairman.

"Hello, Roman," the chairman answered. "Sit down. Have you come on business or just dropped in? "

Roman sat down opposite the chairman at his desk. They were about the same height. Only the chairman's face was a bit milder and his glance was not so confident. He had only been elected to his office a short time before and was a little shy of his new chair and smart coat.

Roman started the conversation in a very round-about fashion.

"We've known each other a long time, haven't we? "

"Sure, why? "

"Remember how we fought the flood on the mine? "

"Yes...."

"Wasn't it you who changed the primers which had failed to explode? "

"Look here, what d'you want—a trip to a holiday camp, or a loan? "

"Neither.... Igor, one of these primers could explode in your hands, couldn't it? "

"Tell me what you want, Roman, without beating about the bush."

"That's what I'm driving at. We are not afraid to change a primer, but when it comes...." Roman looked the chairman in the eye and proceeded to tell him Pashka's story.

"What can you say to me, you chairman of the trade union committee? The boy is fourteen."

"Don't push me," said the chairman. He said no more and just took a book from his desk—Labour Code—and placed it in front of Roman.

Then Roman made a speech. He said that bureaucracy was a terrible thing and it made him sick to see sloth and indifference hiding behind a good law.

Then Roman asked:

"Look here, Igor, that Pashka boy could be the finest youngster in the Soviet Union. Perhaps our fathers had reason to be proud of themselves, starting work at a factory at fourteen and still finding time to get an education at evening courses and colleges? "

The chairman gazed at Roman with awe, as though on the point of slapping him on the shoulder and saying: "Right you are! " However, instead he said in dismay: "I just can't do it...."

For a week Pashka lived with Roman. Every day Roman assured him: "Wait a bit, we'll think of something. Write a letter to your mother and say all is well."

Some of the Komsomol chaps suggested that the YCL dues be increased by 50 kopecks and a grant should be paid to Pashka out of that money.

That was rejected.

It was suggested that Pashka's birth certificate should be forged.

That was rejected.

Pashka ate sparingly and kept asking, "Anya, how much is this tin?"

"Why d'you ask? "

"I'm just curious."

Pashka dropped into shops, looked at the prices and did some mental arithmetic. Sixty kopecks a tin. I ate one third, that makes twenty kopecks. The sugar is ninety-four kopecks. Say two hundred grams. I must eat less sugar.

Then he went to the canteen and inquired about the prices of dishes there.

Buckwheat porridge with meat is twenty-three kopecks. Anya puts more butter in it, naturally.... Borshch, twenty-one kopecks.

He slept on a campbed in the kitchen.

"I have no spare sheets," Anya complained. "I've given him an old table-cloth."

Roman made no objection, just said: "Pashka and I don't care if it's a table-cloth or a curtain as long as there's roof overhead."

One evening Igor came to see Roman. The three of them were having supper. Igor took off his coat, sat down at the table and asked Anya to give him a helping too.

"I've thought of something," he said. "I can adopt your Pashka. Let him live with me. We shall send money to his mother every month. What d'you say? I think it's a swell idea."

Roman licked his spoon clean and knocked with it on his big forehead.

"Some philosopher or other said: 'Man is an incredible phenomenon!' "

"Your philosopher was a fool," Igor replied with a smile. "It's quite credible, we'll live together, he and I."

Roman bent across the table and poked Igor into the stomach with the spoon.

"It's you who're a fool, the worst kind. Who wants your charity? What the hell does Pashka want with an adopted father? He has a family of his own, mother, sister, a young brother. He wants a job."

Igor pushed the spoon away and barked, crimson with hurt: "Don't you make a fool out of me! How can we give him a proper job when he hasn't even got a passport? "

Then Anya rose and started speaking in an unusual, ringing voice: "Perhaps what I want to say has nothing to do with it all, only it is my belief that people must be inwardly motivated. They shouldn't follow reason alone. Perhaps I'm being over-emotional, perhaps I'm plain silly, but I am convinced that people who've never experienced this kind of feeling are really unlucky."

"Let him have it, Anya," Roman said approvingly.

Igor sipped his tea morosely.

"Feelings, my foot.... And Pashka's not had a haircut for weeks. I wanted to help, and you.... Where are you off to, Pashka? Stop! "

But Pashka had already pulled his hat on and dashed out.

Roman found him two hours later. He was sitting on the rock that rose crookedly outside the town, crying.

Roman sat down beside him.

"Stop this snivelling," he said. "You never cried when the bear licked you and now here you are bawling for no reason at all. Let's sing a song instead."

This suggestion was the last thing Pashka expected. But he had lost all capacity for resentment.

"Sing away," he said, "what's it to you? " And he turned away.

"You're quite right. What's it to me? I have a home, a family, a job, I will soon graduate from college and soon have a son. Zina, Igor and all the other chaps also have enough cares of their own...." Roman crackled his fingers. He seemed to be arguing with somebody about a thing that was as clear as day. Suddenly, as though flaring up at the stupid stubbornness of his interlocutor, he said: "You deserve a sock in the jaw for insulting people."

Pashka moved away to the very edge of the boulder. But Roman reached him there, jerked his shaggy cap off and wiped his face with it as with a sponge.

"Stop snivelling, hear! What's your great trouble? They're offering you quite a choice: boarding school, vocational school. They'll find a place for your sister. They'll help your mother. There's no reason whatever for all this blubbering. But no, you must have everything at once. Of course, you're the most important person on earth. You know what a philosopher said: 'Man is an amazing phenomenon! ' "

"You said it differently at table," Pashka muttered.

"I was talking about something else then."

"It's easy for you to say." Pashka pulled up the tops of his boots, buttoned up his jacket and rose.

"I'll be going," he said. "Mum must've got my letter by now. I bet she's glad...."

"Shut up, will you! " Roman shouted. "Crumping on and on. My mother, now, she'll never get a letter from me. I footed it all alone, like you. The war was on, the nazis rolling along all our roads on their iron wheels. I was six years old. No father, no mother, nothing to eat. On I walked and I didn't snivel. An old man picked me up. He had a violin in a black case...."

Roman kicked a biggish stone and it rolled down, raising a cloud of dust and drawing smaller stones along in its wake. Roman watched the stones knock each other and flow down like a dry stream.

"He had a violin," he repeated. "The main string had snapped. He kept asking everybody we met whether they had any violin strings.

"People stared at him as at a madman. War was raging all around and here he was asking about violin strings. I promised him to buy him a lot of thick strings when I grew up, the thickest ones that would never break. He laughed and said: 'When you have a son, teach him to love music. That will be enough. Then we'll be quits.' "

Roman seemed to have forgotten about Pashka's problems. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder and gave him a shake.

"D'you know the song *I roam the countries far and near*, and my pet marmot is with me? He taught me that song. There were soldiers sitting round a fire, cooking some porridge. Their gun stood by the roadside. They had brought this gun out of encirclement, pulled it all the way. They

gave us some porridge and asked the man to play his violin; 'Come on,' they said, 'play us a song, Dad, perhaps it'll be the last time we hear a bit of music.'

"The old man took his violin out of the case, apologised for one string being broken and started playing. And I sang that song.

"The soldiers looked down. It was not like this that they had pictured the war. They said nothing when I finished the song either, just pulled at their cigarettes until they scorched their moustaches. Then the old man said, 'Excuse me, comrades .soldiers, but now I'm going to play you another song, a very beautiful one.'

"He started playing, but then lowered his bow and said: 'Excuse me, comrades soldiers, but my instrument hasn't got the tone for this song. It should be played on silver trumpets.' He pressed his violin to his chest and began to sing: 'Arise, ye Russian people, arise to mortal battle. Arise, ye Russian people, arise to last great battle.' "

Roman blew his nose into a huge, napkin-like handkerchief, and felt about with his foot for another stone.

Pashka stared at the tops of mountains wrapped in lilac mist. Naturally he'd never have cried if there was a war on. Instead he would....

"The old man brought me to Leningrad and put me in a children's home. Later I learned that he died during the blockade.... You have no idea how much I owe to how many people. My whole life wouldn't be enough to pay them back. They've probably forgotten all about me by now. There was a little chap Romka in a children's home.

There was a young fellow Romka in a factory trade school. Why 'was'? He is. He's become Roman Adamovich."

Roman gave the stone a strong push. It rolled down the slope, wavered on the edge of the cliff and then plunged down breaking invisible bushes.

"Hey you! " an angry shout came from below. "Are you crazy? "

Two dry fists came into sight over the edge of the cliff. They were followed by a middle-aged man in a tarpaulin jacket, who climbed the rock nimbly.

"Have you been pushing stones down? " he demanded from Pashka. "Nearly broke my theodolite...."

Roman rose and said with an embarrassed cough: "It was me, Victor Nikolayevich.... Sorry...."

The middle-aged man glanced at the two of them from under his shaggy eyebrows and jerked his cheek.

"You then. Young people these days haven't got enough sense to go round. Look at his jack boots. A musketeer! " He nodded at Pashka's top-boots, pulled an aluminium box out of his pocket, took a big white pill out of it and put it under his tongue. Then he said placatingly:

"Never mind. Actually the stone landed quite a way off. I just wanted to give you a good scare so that you don't do it again. What have you two been discussing? "

"Nothing much," Roman said in some confusion. "I've been telling Pashka my biography."

Victor Nikolayevich gave Pashka a quick sizing-up glance.

"So this is the famous pioneer? Zina the secretary told me about him."

The next day Zina, Igor and this middle-aged man, the geodesist Victor Nikolayevich, came to Roman's place. The geodesist's neck was wrapped in a scarf and the skin on his face was dark and hard.

"Here," Zina said, "Victor Nikolayevich has come up with an idea."

The geodesist nodded and said, instead of a greeting:

"That's how it is, Pashka. No, just look at his boots. I wish I had a pair like that. Strong boots. A real man's footwear."

Igor explained:

"Victor Nikolayevich is allowed to take on school-children as assistants during the summer holidays." He looked at Pashka triumphantly. And Zina chuckled to herself as she nibbled at a rusk, as though it wasn't her idea at all.

"You'll live at the hostel, they'll advance you some money to tide you over at first and you'll do whatever Victor Nikolayevich tells you. He's your boss now. Collect your traps and come along to the hostel. We'll show you which is your bed," Igor commanded. "Come on, Pashka."

Pashka stood staring at Zina. Her glance was no longer prickly like during their first meeting.

"Come on, you finest youngster," she said.

Pashka struggled with the first sound of "thank you" so long that finally Roman had to say it for him, and he turned his face away.

In the middle of the night Pashka woke up in his new bed and looked at the clock. The midnight polar sun was peeping through the chinks in the curtains and cast a red blotch on the face of the clock. The black hands seemed to be suspended in the air surrounded by the squiggles of the figures.

Pashka felt uncomfortable under his clean sheet. The bed was too big. The room was too big, too, and it seemed bare. The opalescent ball of the lamp under the ceiling. The breathing of sleeping people. Mocking snores in the far corner.

Pashka pulled his blanket over his head and tried to breathe lightly and not stir at all.

The midnight sun slid along the horizon outside. The excavator could be heard clanging far away.

Pashka fell fast asleep towards morning. He had a hazy but disturbing dream. He was curled up, in a tight ball, his head stuck under the pillow.

"Get up! " Roman cried, shaking him.

He had come to the hostel straight after finishing his shift. He wanted personally to send Pashka into his new life.

"Time to get up," he was saying.

Pashka leapt out of bed.

In the morning the big room became crowded with strong backs, taut legs, hot muscles and hoarse laughter. There were four young men

living in the room, and in the morning they filled it with their broad movements and loud voices.

A fellow with a big mane of hair jumped up from the bed opposite Pashka's and began doing morning jerks without opening his eyes. Then he dived back into bed saying: "I had a peach of a dream. I must see it to the end."

Roman pulled the blanket off him. The hairy chap sat up, blinked several times and said to Pashka: "It's all wrong. You have your front backwards."

Pashka checked his clothing hastily. His neighbours laughed. Roman laughed too. Pashka was put out, but finally laughed too.

"Wash your face," the hairy chap said. "What's the hurry, it's not pay-day yet."

When Pashka washed, his neighbour gave him a breakfast of a herring sandwich and a mug of tea. Then each of his room-mates gave him a hearty slap on the back, saying: "Good luck, Pashka."

"Nat'rally," Pashka mumbled, not knowing what else to say. He felt all these people expected something of him, hoped that he would make good. He did not yet know the names of his room-mates, but he could see they were all smiling, and he was prepared to love them.

Roman walked him to the geodesists' office. There he delivered him into Victor Nikolayevich's hands, gave Pashka yet another slap on the back and said "Good luck".

When a man begins a new life, he seems different even to himself. And everything around him, habitual things he has ceased noticing, also

look different. The earth seems to have donned new clothes, shaking off the dull grey dust of everyday and revealing new, bright colours. Everyone, except the hopelessly staid, makes this discovery several times in his lifetime, and is always heartened by it.

Victor Nikolayevich and Pashka marked out sites for the probes and conducted some complicated surveying in which Pashka did not understand a thing. His job was to hammer in striped pegs, run about with a tape-measure and such like. Sometimes they stayed away from town for weeks on end, climbing the rocky hills and moss-and bilberry-grown valleys.

From hilltops where they lugged their heavy theodolite with a lot of panting and sometimes crawling on all fours a beautiful panorama of the iron-and-steel works opened up before them, the white structures of concentrating mills climbing the hillside in bright terraces and further on the ore-smelting plant with such a tall chimney-stack that it seemed to pierce the sky with its smokey tip. Lorries ran along the road carrying ore from the open workings. There were red buses and blue buses. There were the town's streets cut in the shape of a pine-tree. There was a red flag flying over the town council. The town was growing fast.

They could also see a narrow black river that was the frontier line between the Soviet Union and Norway.

The country across the border in no way differed from our own: the same hills, scant forest, moss-grown boulders and blue lakes. It

was hard to believe that life was quite different there and that people spoke a different tongue. And that cares incomprehensible to us worried the dwellers of those low-roofed houses at night.

Working with Victor Nikolayevich was very interesting. He knew where the boulders had come from, why trees grew on rocky soil, where the clouds were sailing and what the birds were calling to each other. He knew just about everything. Sometimes he would say to Pashka: "We are explorers, Pashka, for all that we don't sail the high seas. We travel across the earth and discover new lands and new routes."

"Not half," Pashka would say sceptically. "There's no lands left to discover nowadays."

"Yes there are. Look at this land, for instance. Five years ago there was nothing here but bare rocks. Even the wolves couldn't live here—they died of boredom. And look how jolly the place looks now. A landscape without human habitation is only attractive in a gilded frame. I've trodden my fill up and down those landscapes, I've worn my feet sore, so I should know."

In the evening they made a fire, opened a tin or two and warmed their contents in a frying-pan. Victor Nikolayevich would say: "Our fellow-geodesists are wandering over the length and breadth of the earth. Here we are preparing to retire for the night and on the opposite side of the globe another couple may have just woken up and are making their breakfast. D'you know what they'll be having for breakfast? "

"No."

"Neither do I. Things are different on the opposite side of the globe. No birches or pines, just palms all around."

Pashka would lie down on a bed of pine boughs and stare into the pink sky.

In June the sun never sets in these parts. It just wanders about the sky in circles, grazing the hill-tops with its red-hot side. At these moments the trees look like lighted candles and hot sun slag cools in the low-lying parts, iridescent with blues and purples and crimsons.

This land is good too, though there are no palms, Pashka was thinking. Victor Nikolayevich was a jolly person. So was Roman. They're all jolly here. And the weather was fine, too, as though the North had retreated to the very pole, but even there it found no peace from jolly people.

There were lots of jolly people on earth. Not that they were laughing, dancing and bawling songs all the time, they simply marched a step ahead of the others. You won't tire marching with them, nor will you freeze. It's long been known that those who lag behind get the most tired. As for weather, it was always fine, when one's heart was warm, when one had nobody to fear, nothing to be ashamed of and no need to lie.

As he drifted into sleep, lying by the camp-fire, Pashka thought: "I'll send Mummy money when I get the pay-packet. And I'll pay Roman back what I owe him for food. If anything is left I'll buy myself a checked shirt. Shall I give my boots to Victor Nikolayevich, perhaps? "

Victor Nikolayevich used to take a big white pill from an aluminium box and suck it. He had several such boxes. Once Pashka inquired:

"What are these pills you put under the tongue? Are they vitamins or what? "

"Quite right, Pashka, it's vitamin Y, for old men who refuse to stay at home."

That very day they set up the theodolite on a low hill and prepared to start the surveying. But fog crept up from a crevice, filling the valley and settling on their hair as grey beads and sticking to the cheeks and palms.

"See you don't touch the instrument, don't twiddle any knobs," Victor Nikolayevich warned Pashka. "You may put it off true and we'll have to spend another half a day training it."

"Why tell me? " Pashka retorted. "I'm not a baby."

Victor Nikolayevich took his boots off, to let his feet rest. Pashka glanced at his worn shoes and asked, looking down on the ground.

"Why did you take me on, Victor Nikolayevich? "

The geodesist replied, his eyes also cast down:

"Aren't you a prickly one, Pashka? What is forever itching you? "

Then he lifted Pashka's head by the chin, looked into his eyes and said: "I owe a debt.... To my younger son."

"Is he dead? " Pashka asked, immediately regretting his question.

"Why, no. He's alive. I have three of them, sonny. The elder is in Moscow, a pilot. The second is in Kaliningrad, a sailor. And the

younger one...," Victor Nikolayevich paused, as though hesitating to speak, then said it, "the younger one is in prison."

Pashka had a feeling that the fog had suddenly thickened so that it was difficult to breathe.

"He was an excellent pupil at school until he was twelve. In the sixth form he became a middling pupil. In the seventh form he just tagged along. In the eighth form all he could think of was dancing.... I was in Kamchatka then. The two elder boys had left home. My old woman never let me know what was happening to our youngest...."

"You didn't meet my Dad in Kamchatka by any chance? " Pashka was on the point of asking. But he refrained, and just wondered, "I still don't see why he gave me this job."

Pashka raised his eyes and saw that the older man had thrown his head back and kept opening his mouth wide, as though trying to bite off a big chunk of the fog. Then he slumped down on the ground. His chin and chest shuddered from time to time as from blows.

"Christ! " Pashka shouted and rushed to Victor Nikolayevich trying to lift him into a sitting position. But the old geodesist raised his hand and shook his head indicating that he was to be left alone.

Pashka was crawling around him on all fours.

"Victor Nikolayevich, what's the matter with you? Victor Nikolayevich, please...." And suddenly he screamed in a panic, "Uncle Victor! "

When the old man's eyes shut, squeezing out two big clear tears, Pashka jumped up and ran

down to the road. It was quite near their hill and while still running down the slope Pashka noticed a big lorry coming along loaded with sacks.

"Stop! " he yelled and, his arms flung out, rushed into the way of the tip-lorry with a bison figurine on its bonnet. His big boots caught at something and he went sprawling on the road. A wave of hot acrid smoke hit his face as the truck rolled over him and stopped with a screeching of the brakes, gravel flying in a stream from under its tires.

The driver frightened out of his wits jumped out of the cab. He raised Pashka's head by the hair. His hands shook uncontrollably.

"Alive? "

"Yes."

"So you're alive.... I have a good mind to push your teeth down your throat," said the driver and then, taking a lungful of air shouted: "Why the hell must you throw yourself under the lorry? Have you no eyes? Lucky you to get between the wheels, or it'd be all up with you! "

Pashka recognised his shaggy room-mate from the hostel and caught at his raised hand.

"Wait a minute, don't wave your arms.... Uncle Victor...."

"Go along, nephew! You ought to be given a good hiding to clear your eyes. Get out of my hair! " The shaggy chap climbed into the cab, shook his fist at Pashka, let in the clutch and the heavy lorry rolled off.

"Stop! " Pashka shouted after it belatedly, "Stop, I tell you! "

He ran back up the hill. Victor Nikolayevich was lying on his back, his fists stuck under his shoulder-blades. His face was grey. White stubble glistened on it metallically. If the colour of the hair does indeed depend on metal compounds in it, the hair of Victor Nikolayevich consisted of pure stainless nickel.

Pashka grabbed the theodolite, tripod and all. His knees buckled under him from its weight. He no longer shouted "Stop! " at the passing lorries. Instead he set the theodolite in the middle of the road.

"Now you'll stop," he mumbled. "You'll have to stop, you heartless petrol-eaters...."

A lorry stopped. In the back frontier guards sat on benches and by the cab stuck out the ears of a big Alsatian.

A senior lieutenant with a revolver in a wooden holster on his belt jumped out of the cab into the road.

"What's the idea of cluttering up the road? Kolyshkin, Trokhimchuk! Take this tripod away! "

Two soldiers jumped down. They were in a hurry. Probably the frontier guards had some urgent and important business. Perhaps they ought not to be detained. But Pashka could not think of such matters. He grabbed the officer by the belt and shouted: "Victor Nikolayevich is dying! A geodesist. He must be taken to a hospital! Comrade senior lieutenant, please! "

"Have you set the tripod here to stop a car? It's an expensive instrument, they could knock it down."

"Nat'rally.... Comrade senior lieutenant! "

"Semenikhin," the officer said, coming up to the lorry body. "Go with the boy. Kolyshkin, you too."

A sergeant with a red cross bag slung over his shoulder jumped down.

The lorry dashed off and disappeared from sight, leaving behind only the smell of petrol.

Pashka ran ahead, looking round every few steps. The two soldiers hurried after him. They wore the green jackets of frontier guards and had carbines slug over their shoulders.

Victor Nikolayevich was lying in the same posture. An aluminium box with the old man's Vitamin Y was lying in the grass beside him.

The sergeant picked it up, read "Validol" and shook his head. Then he took off his first-aid bag and squatted by the geodesist whispering: "In a minute, old man, in a minute...."

Pashka turned away when the needle of the hypodermic syringe pierced the dry skin of Victor Nikolayevich's arm.

"Now the main thing is to handle him carefully," said the sergeant. "Look here, laddie, have you got a blanket or a tent? Something to make a stretcher of."

"We've got a blanket."

"We'll dismantle that tripod and make a first-rate stretcher," said the soldier. "Come on, laddie, let's bring it."

The soldier shouldered Victor Nikolayevich's knapsack, took the big grey box where they packed the theodolite and started walking back to the road. Pashka picked up the tea-kettle and the pot and trotted after him.

There, by the road, they dismantled the tripod. The soldier Kolyshkin went back to Victor Nikolayevich. Pashka sat down by the road on the dusty gravel.

"People keep working all their life," he was thinking. "That Vitamin Y doesn't seem to be much good—they just thought it up to cheer you up. And if a man does not work, all the vitamins in the world won't help him. Try putting Victor Nikolayevich on a feather-bed, bringing him cocoa in the morning, taking his temperature all the time, and he would no longer be a proper man, but a useless bed-ridden patient. And no care in the world will be any use. It must be a bad thing to lie on your back and listen to your own heart stumbling and beg it: come on, boy, knock some more, how can you betray me like that? "

Pashka began feeling his own chest in search of his heart, but did not find it either to the left or to the right. Then he tried feeling his pulse and couldn't find that either.

Meanwhile the two frontier-guards brought Victor Nikolayevich over on the improvised stretcher. His eyes were open now. He was looking straight up, into the eternal blueness of the sky where, according to what people used to believe, the souls of the departed float off. But his gaze was stern, as though he was dividing the heaven's vault into triangles and mentally driving in pegs in places suitable for building bridges, erecting heavenly cities, laying roads and stretching high-voltage transmission lines.

A fifteen-ton lorry came down the road. It braked sharply, and Pashka's shaggy room-mate jumped down.

"What was it all about? " he shouted to Pashka and, seeing the geodesist lying on the stretcher, muttered, "Oh, I see.... Now, Pashka, why couldn't you explain sensibly? "

He lowered the back of the body, talking all the time, as though trying to justify himself:

"It only hit me near the concentrating mill that something must have happened to make Pashka dash under the lorry. Isn't it a hell of a to-do? "

The soldiers lifted Victor Nikolayevich into the back of the lorry carefully, then loaded the instruments and the knapsack. Pashka wanted to put it under Victor Nikolayevich's head, but it appeared the soldiers intended to hold the stretcher all the way, so that the geodesist shouldn't be shaken on the ruts. They stood in the lorry's body, their feet planted wide, the carbines gleaming dully on their backs.

So they brought Victor Nikolayevich to the hospital where the doctors took charge of him.

"I must be off, Pashka," the shaggy driver said. "They're waiting for the cement at the factory. You can hitch yourself a ride as far as the hostel."

The soldiers helped Pashka load his things onto a passing lorry.

"Thank you very much," Pashka said.

"Never mind the thanks, laddie, off you go," the soldiers said in parting and, lighting up a cigarette each, went their own way.

"If I had some money, I'd have bought them a pack of the very best cigarettes," Pashka thought.

The red sun was suspended over the stack of the ore-smelting mill. It looked like a torch.

Scientists say that in future people will hoist an artificial electric sun over the North, which will warm up this frigid land in winter and, in addition, play nice tunes every morning.

Lorries loaded high with all kinds of cargo were rushing towards them. By the railway crossing the drivers shouted words of greeting to each other. Life was flowing on in a taut stream.

"I guess Victor Nikolayevich's already been brought his cocoa in cup and saucer," Pashka thought. "Only he won't drink it. What he likes is strong tea from our kettle."

There was a crush at the geodesists' office—it was pay-day. Pashka was allowed to get his money out of turn because he was tired, because he was a brick, because he had not lost his head. The cashier collected fifty kopecks from each to buy Victor Nikolayevich nice things to take to the hospital. They all knew that the old man would never eat them but would share them out between his ward-mates. But they all wanted to send him their good wishes and a sign of their affection. And the best things to convey these feelings were these silly flowers and the oranges and apples which grew on the opposite side of the globe and smelled of hot winds.

Pashka pulled off his top-boots. "Here," he said, "give them to Victor Nikolayevich from me. They're just the right size for him."

The cashier came out from behind her desk without even pulling in the drawer with the money.

"The chap is off his rocker," she said. "Why don't you add some socks? "

Everybody laughed.

"He'll put them on his bedside table instead of flowers."

Pashka was put out.

"But he won't stay in the hospital forever," he cried. "He won't ever agree to stay there long. What are you laughing at? "

The geodesists lifted him aloft, lowered him into the boots and pushed him to the desk.

Pashka was paid in full, his regular wages and the extra for field work. The cashier took fifty kopecks for Victor Nikolayevich: "Like from everybody else," she explained.

Pashka did not go to his hostel room. He went to Roman's place. He had a nagging feeling that people were not taking him seriously. They were forever laughing and joking on his account. They'd never understand. Pashka wanted to pay back his debts. He had loads of money. "I'll send some to Mum. And I'll pay Roman back for the grub.... Who else, now? "

Roman's room was full of people and noise. They were all sitting round the table talking loudly. Zina was there, with Igor and many other Komsomol chaps.

"Hi, Pashka! " Roman greeted him, grabbed him by the shoulders and led to the sofa. "Look at him! "

A tiny person in diapers was lying on the sofa, a frown on his forehead and his eyes a misty blue. He was kneading the air with his pink heels and pink fists and showing his pink gums.

"A boy, I suppose? "

"That's right, very much a boy. Can't you see? "

Pashka was embarrassed. Anya laughed. She had become slim and very light. Under her clothes she had become a weightless creature, throbbing with joy and never able to stand still a moment.

"Congratulations," Pashka said, ashamed of the long and solemn word. "I guess I'll drop in later. I haven't washed yet."

"No scabbing now! " Roman shouted. "Let's drink to my son." He pulled Pashka towards the table and poured him a glassful of sweet yellow wine. "Come on, down with it! "

Pashka downed the wine and licked his lips.

The boys and girls sitting round the table were admiring the baby and cracking jokes at Roman's expense. And Roman, red with joy and confusion, bragged away:

"He's as strong as I and his character is Anya all over. He's a very orderly baby, knows what's what and only cries when he must, when he's hungry or wet."

Zina was eating sweets and laughing. Igor was smoothing out the wrappers she dropped into a saucer and piling them carefully one on top of the other.

"I've had a call from the hospital," he whispered to Pashka. "You're a brick, Pashka."

In the corner stood a tricycle hung all over with packages and rattles.

Presents, Pashka gathered. Isn't it a laugh, to give him all these presents when he'd just been born. What for?

He put his hand into his pocket, felt the rustling notes and began making mental arithmetic all over again: "Thirty rubles for Mum, then I must leave some for food for two weeks, then I must pay back Roman."

He glanced at Roman, huge, happy and gay.

"Tuck into it, Pashka," he was saying. "There's the sausage and the cheese and the sardines. I've now got a son...."

"He won't take it," Pashka thought with a sinking heart. "Might very well give me a cuff, too."

Pashka took his hand out of the pocket and stood up. He took off his top-boots, walked barefoot to the tricycle and put them on the floor beside it.

"They're good boots," he said. "Fishermen's boots. It's a present from me. Let him wear them when he grows up."

THE PANTHER

(Original title: “Dubravka”)

Spinney was sitting on a rock clasping her wet knees with her arms. The sea was like an enormous blue shell. The horizon was very far away and she could see ships in the farthermost distance. They seemed to rise over the water and melt in the transparent air.

The rock she was sitting on had long broken away from the shore and grown close to the waves with their restless character and, wet with spray, itself sparkled like a wave. The rock was her friend.

On the shore, by the edge of the water, wandered the boys, yawning from heat and idleness.

"Look at that cloud. It's as though a breaker whipped itself up to the sky and left a piece of its mane hanging there."

"Making things up again," they'd say. "Go and cool your head."

The boys were her enemies.

Not so long ago Spinney used to chase a tattered ball with these very boys, went into the mountains with them to pick cornel cherries and wild plums and climbed over the fences of open-air cinemas to see new films for free. Then suddenly she had lost interest in these pursuits.

"Here's a fish's tail, pin it on and be a mermaid," the boys teased her.

"Shameless bums," replied Spinney. Why shameless, she did not know herself.

At the beginning of that summer Spinney joined a drama club for senior schoolchildren. They did not want to take her on at first. The monitor said:

"You cannot possibly comprehend the lofty philosophy of Hamlet. You are not developed enough."

The director, an old gray-haired man with very clean dry hands, smiled.

"We are not going to produce 'Hamlet'. Only two great actors were equal to the part—Edward Kean and Vassily Kachalov. Let's not make ourselves ridiculous."

Senior schoolchildren always imagine they know everything. They waxed indignant and insisted that Hamlet was as simple as mooing, as far as they were concerned. They quarrelled among themselves and the next day agreed to produce "The Snow Queen".

Spinney was given the role of the Little Highwaywoman.

Then everybody in the group began falling in love. Boys wrote love notes to girls. Girls narrowed their eyes languorously, twitched their shoulders and laughed unnaturally for no reason at all.

The boys were noisy and spoke in exclamatory phrases. They spoke in elevated terms about the most ordinary everyday things. On their way home from rehearsals they did hand-stands on bridge railings and big gypsum flower-pots with nasturtiums in them and pushed girls into flower beds.

They made Spinney deliver their notes and gave her condescending fillips on the head.

To begin with Spinney put up with it and with their condescension out of curiosity. Then she began talking back.

A girl would say, collecting the note from her:

"Not another? Whenever is it going to stop? You didn't open and read it on the way, did you? "

"Why should I want to read this trash? " Spinney would retort.

When the Snow Queen patted her on the cheek she bit her finger.

Once she copied out Tatiana's letter to Onegin in a clear neat hand and posted it to the handsomest and most popular boy who played Karl the Raven.

The next day the boys made all the girls, by force or by guile, write a few words and compared the handwriting. It never occurred to them to check Spinney's.

She was sitting on a chair in front of the stage dying to pelt those big boys with stones. She wanted the big girls to stumble against the chairs, fall and sprain their ankles. She was sitting there, her fingers clenched and contempt overflowing her heart.

The old actor came up to her and put his warm dry hand on her head.

"Sixteen is the most uncouth age," he said nodding at the stage. "They have no inkling that the loveliest fairy-tale of all is called 'Cinderella'."

He fingered Spinney's hair caressingly.

"You're a gifted girl. You possess sincerity. Incidentally, why did they give you the name Spinney? "

"I don't know."

"It's a very nice name. D'you want to be an actress when you grow up? "

"I don't know...."

"The wisest fairy-tale in the world is called "The Emperor's New Clothes'. And art is that little boy who said aloud that the king was naked.... So you don't know why they named you Spinney? "

"No, it just happened."

The actor removed his hand from her head and walked to the stage, very erect, very light-footed. Spinney fancied that strings were stretched taut under his clothes and that they hummed when he walked.

After the rehearsal Spinney walked home a little behind the rest of the gang. The boys were still trying to unearth the sender of that letter to Karl the Raven. The girls laughed mysteriously, making out they knew but would not tell.

Spinney ran ahead, climbed the latticed fence of a sanatorium and shouted to them from her safe perch: "I wrote that letter! "

The Snow Queen laughed woodenly.

"Bunkum! She's making it up! "

Spinney jumped down on the other side of the fence and shouted again, "Stupid is the word for you. You're the most uncouth age! "

The robbers and the trolls forgot about their decorous grownupness and scrambled over the fence after her. But Spinney was fleet-footed, and

she knew the garden of the Airmen's Sanatorium inside out.

That evening she swam across to her rock.

She sat there wondering why nature was always so beautiful. In the daytime and at night. During both storms and calm weather. The trees are lovely when sunlit and when lashed by the rain. And even when broken and twisted by a squall. White clouds, grey clouds, purple clouds—they were all beautiful. Lightning. Mountains droning in a storm. But people were only beautiful when they smiled, or thought, or sang songs. Also, she knew, they were particularly beautiful when they performed a feat of valour. But she had never seen one performed.

The waves were rolling in from the open sea like disturbing thoughts. They seemed bent on telling people a secret they had to know if they wanted to have a good life.

When Spinney reached the beach, the boys surrounded her.

"Look at the film-star! "

Spinney sank down on the warm pebbles.

One of the boys, big and fat and with huge fists, nicknamed Sandbag, came up and gave her a kick.

"Get up, we want to tell you a thing or two."

Spinney leapt up, butted Sandbag in the chin, sending him sprawling on his back, then jumped over him and dashed to the steps.

The boys chased her like a pack of dogs chases a cat.

A crowd of lost-looking people was swirling by the landing stage. They had just disembarked

from a steamer and were asking all and sundry how to reach various sanatoriums and holiday homes.

Spinney ran up to a young woman with a yellow leather suitcase.

"May I stand beside you, miss? "

"Delighted," the young woman replied. "But I'm rather in a hurry."

At this point she saw the boys who glared at Spinney vindictively, their fists clenched eloquently. The woman gave a soft laugh.

"I see life is no bed of roses for you. Don't you fear, I won't let them molest you."

"I'm not afraid," Spinney said, "it's just that there are so many more of them. What holiday-home d'you want? "

"None. I'm on my own."

The light of a street-lamp falling from above set sparks playing in the woman's hair. Her eyes had a soft sheen.

"How very beautiful she is," Spinney marvelled. She took the woman's hand gingerly.

"You're looking for somewhere to stay? Come with me. Our house is nicely situated. You will like it, I'm sure.... There is one vacant room."

All the way home Spinney was trotting crabwise, never tearing her gaze off the woman's face. Her throat was dry with anxiety. She was afraid the woman might change her mind, turn off into a side-street and lose herself in the lush greenery.

She touched the woman's hand again.

"What is your name, please? "

So they met, Spinney and Valentina Grigorievna.

* * *

The house where Spinney lived looked, if viewed from one side, like a crooked mosque, and, from another, like a Greek temple. It had garrets, Moorish galleries and towers decorated with rusty weather-cocks. Stone and wooden stairways crawled out of the house in the most unlikely places and there was even one made of iron, which hung in the air like a bridge.

The house swept the holidaymakers off their feet with its fantastic appearance. Around it grew masses of trees and shrubs. Flowers made motley splashes of colour on its walls, like patches on the stonemason's pants. They were southern plants, striking in colour and whimsical in shape.

Valentina Grigorievna rented a tiny room on the first floor which boasted an iron beadstead, a bedside table and a sweeping view from the window—of roofs, mountains and the sea.

A helicopter rattled in the sky on its regular flight to the dusty regional centre. Night flowed down from the mountains, filling the streets with the smell of pine needles and bitter almonds.

On the ground floor, in an equally tiny room and on a similar iron bed Spinney lay and thought about Valentina Grigorievna. She had never seen such a beautiful woman in her life. Perhaps it had been the effect of night lighting? Perhaps in the

daytime Valentina Grigorievna would look ordinary? People always looked better in the evening. You could not see the wrinkles.

Spinney was hot, even though she was lying under only a sheet. She got out of bed, and, in vest and shorts, started climbing out through the window.

"You'll break your neck some time," her grandmother grumbled sleepily. "Where are you off to at this time of night? "

"I'll sleep on a bench in the garden. Even a cat would suffocate in this room."

"Suit yourself," Grandmother said. "At your age benches don't seem hard."

Sleep did not come. Spinney looked at Valentina Grigorievna's window, sprayed with moonlight. The bench had rotten supports and kept wobbling when Spinney moved. She lay for a while, and then, unable to sleep, got up and made her way stealthily to the Teachers' Sanatorium.

The lights were out in the big house with stone columns and staircase and balustrades of yellow tufa stone. Silk curtains swayed in the open windows. It was as though all the inmates, in defiance of the doctors' orders, were sitting in their rooms smoking and that white smoke curled out of every open window.

In the vestibule the door-keeper was dozing, the lamp shaded with a newspaper.

Flowers lived by the fountain that rustled in soft spurts. The day-flowers were asleep, and the night-flowers wide awake. Black moths tickled them with their probosces, carrying away blobs of pollen on their wings.

Spinney sat on the brick fence for a while then climbed down into the garden noiselessly and ran through the shadow of the cypresses towards the bed with carnations and gladioli.

At night the gladioli looked like so many ballerinas, standing on tiptoe, their arms raised above their heads.

Spinney was fond of carnations. Her grandmother had told her a long time ago that the carnation was the flower of the revolution.

She picked the carnations carefully. Back on the fence, she arranged the flowers into a nice bouquet, jumped down and went home.

The petrol smell had settled on the asphalt in a thick blanket. Buses were cooling in the garages. Launches rubbed their white sides against the moorage. Stars were reflected in the shop-windows. Night had approached the dividing-line. It had not yet started to melt away, but the first sun ray was ripening just beyond the horizon.

In the yard Spinney ran into a man, also a tenant in her house. He had twins of about three or four. He smelt of fish and tobacco. His name was Pyotr Petrovich.

Spinney hid her flowers behind her back.

"I can see through hard objects," he said. "You can't hide anything from me."

"Why should I hide anything from you?" Spinney said and shook the flowers. "I picked them in the Teachers' Sanatorium."

"Not the best place," Pyotr Petrovich said. "The carnations are bigger in the town's public garden."

Spinney went up the suspension staircase, then walked along the cornice. The man watched her from below, puffing at his cigarette.

Let him look! Spinney reached the drain-pipe and climbed up it to a tower with a weather-cock. She walked the length of yet another cornice and thus reached Valentina Grigorievna's open window. She sat on the window-sill for a while watching the red beacon of the light-house flash on and off. Then she climbed into the room, groped for a glass on the night-table, filled it with water from a jug and put the flowers in it.

* * *

Spinney was woken up by the sun.

On the flagstone walk two small children wearing red rompers were stringing bits of orange peel on sticks. Then they hit the sticks against their sandals, and the pieces of peel hurtled like rockets and landed softly near a short-legged white dog. The dog had awesome whiskers, shaggy eye-brows and a pointed beard. Its name was Kaiser Wilhelm Ferdinand the Third or, in everyday usage, Willie. He tried to catch the peel in flight and even chewed at it, to please the children, making faces from the astringent taste. Then he rose from his snug pool of sun under a bush, emitted a few cough-like barks and ran off.

The twins in red rompers were called Sergei and Natasha. When they bawled they stood back

to back, to make sure their bawling would be audible from all sides. They fought shoulder to shoulder. They fell asleep and woke up at the same instant. The only thing they did by turns was to ask questions.

The twins came up to Spinney.

"Why did you sleep on the bench? " asked Natasha.

Sergei was not interested in why Spinney had slept on the bench. Being a man, he held the opinion that people could sleep wherever they liked.

He asked:

"Who is stronger, a witch or a Baba-Yaga? "

"They're both strong. They only differ in age. A witch is a young woman and a Baba-Yaga is old."

"Is there such a thing as witch-children? " Natasha asked promptly.

Spinney had long ago learned that the only way to escape questions was by asking questions oneself.

"Is Valentina Grigorievna up? " *

The twins exchanged puzzled glances and asked together.

"What is she like? "

"She's very beautiful. She's rented the room in that turret."

Spinney's grandmother leaned out of the window and called her in for breakfast.

"When she appears, tell me," Spinney ordered the twins. They nodded solemn agreement.

Before Spinney had drunk her mug of milk she heard a yell:

"Spinney, she's out! "

She looked out of the window.

Valentina Grigorievna stood in the yard. She held a white beach bag in her hand. Her dress was white, too, with big purple flowers.

Spinney choked. In daylight Valentina Grigorievna was more beautiful than ever.

Her grandmother looked out into the yard over Spinney's head.

"A rainbow," she said. "I hope to God she doesn't prove a soap-bubble."

Rainbow, Spinney thought. A nice name. Why doesn't somebody give it to a girl? And suddenly asked: "Was it you gave me the name of Spinney? Why? "

"For no particular reason," Grandmother answered.

Sergei and Natasha stood in front of Valentina Grigorievna, holding hands.

"Why are you so beautiful? " Natasha asked.

"Because I wash my ears," Valentina Grigorievna answered. She was about to say something else, but at that moment a man with eyes as dark as the twins' came out of the house and took the children's hands.

"Come and wash your ears at once. And I will wash mine too, with aromatic soap."

"I don't think it will be much use in your case," Valentina Grigorievna said to him mockingly.

"Very well, then I won't use any soap at all." The man smiled and led the twins off to the beach.

Valentina Grigorievna stared after them, biting her lip, then shouted after him belatedly, "Just as you please! " and turned to examine the house.

"D'you like it? " somebody asked her from above. She raised her head. Spinney was sitting on the steps of the suspension staircase. "Good morning," she said.

Standing on tiptoe, Valentina Grigorievna shook hands with Spinney in a comradely fashion. Then she asked with a wave towards the sea. "Who is that man? "

"He's Pyotr Petrovich, Sergei and Natasha's father. He's always teasing. You can never tell whether he's serious or joking. He's nicknamed our house the Mighty Fata Morgana."

"Why? "

"He just thought it up. He's a funny one."

Valentina Grigorievna gave the house a sweeping look.

"It does, indeed, make you think of fata morgana."

"Perhaps," Spinney agreed. "Only I don't know what it is."

"Never mind," said Valentina Grigorievna. "It simply means a funny mirage."

* * *

The boys were sprawling on the beach, faces up to the sun, puffing out their stomachs. It was generally believed that puffed out stomachs caught the sunburn better. It was hard work lying with puffed out stomachs. Soon the boys got tired and turned their backs up to the sun.

"Just let me lay my hands on that Spinney," Sandbag said out of the blue.

His friends never moved. They lay about as though sewn to the beach with sun thread. They were too lazy to speak.

"I will lay my hands on her, just you wait," Sandbag finished his speech.

Sandbag was a local boy. He got his nickname because he just couldn't learn to swim.

"The water won't hold me up," he explained. "My body has a very high density."

Sandbag was leader on dry land. He dropped pieces of dry ice they cadged from ice-cream vendors on the backs of sun-bathers, he caught little girls in sting traps and filled their hair with burs. But what he liked best of all was to visit the salon where the confectioners held their competitions. There they gave you samples of all kinds of cakes provided you bought a ticket and listened to a lecture on proteins and vitamins. Samples were free. Soon, however, they stopped letting Sandbag in. He had too big an appetite and too small a conscience.

Sandbag got plenty of beatings. But the knockout Spinney gave him yesterday he regarded as nothing less than a blot on his escutcheon.

"Just let her show up here," he muttered. "What d'you think, shall I put her nose out of joint or give her a good black eye? "

"Both," somebody suggested in an indifferent tone. "And the bigger the better."

"First try and catch her."

"There she comes," Sandbag cried out.

The boys jumped up, shook off the pebbles that stuck to their stomachs and fixed Spinney with glum stares. But she never so much as batted an eyelid.

She was walking along the beach with Valentina Grigorievna. It was an extremely pleasant and unusual experience. The sun-bathers, as one man, turned to follow them with their eyes. The glances were all kinds, admiring, amazed and even envious and malicious. But none of them were indifferent. The sun-soaked people, usually reluctant to move, were promptly obliging, making way and saying "please", a word Spinney heard but rarely on the beach.

Valentina Grigorievna and Spinney decided to lie down almost at the water's edge. A volleyball rolled up to them, followed by a couple of young fellows tanned brown who, for some reason, had enormous difficulty in retrieving the ball. They'd probably have taken all of half hour to catch it had not Valentina Grigorievna, with a hefty kick, sent the intractable ball flying into the rear.

Senior school-girls from the drama group passed by along the shallow, laughing loudly and splashing each other. They threw Valentina Grigorievna curious glances from the corner of their eyes.

"Can I speak to you a minute, Spinney? " the Snow Queen asked, curving her back gracefully.

"What is it? " asked Spinney, coming up.

"Why have you stopped coming to the rehearsals? You were good, you know," the Snow Queen said benignly, looking over Spinney's head.

"Because you're all vicious cows," Spinney was on the point of answering, "and all you can think of is boys." But she said nothing.

"Who is that woman?" the girls asked her in a whisper.

"She's an actress, from Leningrad," Spinney announced. "A famous actress."

The girls set up a subdued but agitated clamour.

"I told you so! "

"No, it was I who said so."

Only the Snow Queen, consumed by jealousy, said with a shrug: "She's not glamorous enough for a famous actress. What's in grey eyes? Black eyes are much more photogenic. And her hair...."

"She's very beautiful," retorted Spinney. "Extremely beautiful. Nobody would deny it...."

"Yes, she's beautiful," the other girls confirmed.

Spinney gave a haughty snort and curving her back the way the Snow Queen did it, walked back to Valentina Grigorievna.

"Toads," she said to her. "Hypocrites."

The boys filed past them. Sandbag pretended to stumble and fell, sending a stream of pebbles into Spinney's face.

"Very well, Sandbag," Spinney said. "Just you wait."

Valentina Grigorievna laughed.

"You're a funny girl, Spinney," she said. "You seem to be at war with the whole world."

"I have nothing against nice people. But Sandbag, he'd better look out."

When the boys' heads bobbed up and down on the waves like round floats Spinney slipped into the water and swam after them.

Sandbag was crawling along holding to an inflated rubber ring, much behind the other boys. Suddenly something took a firm hold of his legs and jerked him down forcefully. Fear never made anyone stronger—Sandbag let go of his ring and started flailing in terror with his arms. The next moment, true to his nickname, he began to sink. After a few terrifying seconds he felt his legs released and he came up. He gasped for air and saw Spinney lying nonchalantly on his ring.

"Down you go," she said. Sandbag went down obediently.

A second later he came up again.

"Gimme my ring! "

"Take it," Spinney said and pushed the ring away from her.

"Blurb...," said Sandbag. "Ooorl...." A wave pushed a soft salty stopper into his mouth. He floundered in the water, knowing Spinney was not going to help him and ashamed to call for help in her presence. She was swimming around. The ring was also floating nearby.

Sandbag nearly drowned. His eyes turned yellow and round, like huge amber beads.

"Okay," said Spinney at this point. "That'll do for today."

She pushed the ring towards Sandbag, dived and disappeared in the waves.

Sandbag crawled onto the beach fagged out and miserable. He sat down on the sand beside Valentina Grigorievna and coughed a long time,

his stomach caving in spasmodically and water spurting out of his mouth and nose.

"Hard luck? " Valentina Grigorievna asked mockingly.

"Ooops," Sandbag said with a snort. "Blast this sea. Blast Spinney—she swims like a shark...."

* * *

From that day on Spinney found herself in the lime-light. The boys stalked her on the shore and even resorted to dirty tricks to revenge themselves on her. But she was not easily caught off her guard. Most of the time she was under the reliable protection of Valentina Grigorievna.

She attacked one boy after another in the open sea. She'd hang on to one like grim death, climb onto his shoulders, grab his hair and push his head under water time and time again, until the victim begged for mercy.

"Have a drink of mineral water," she'd urge him. "Have a nice long drink."

Then she'd swim off to her rock and sit there, clasping her wet knees. The waves hit the shore with insistent heavy thuds. Retreating, they made a sound that was like a giant sucking in air through clenched teeth. The waves lifted the pebbles from the sea bottom. Biggish round stones rolled after the sea with a clatter. It was like express trains rushing past one after another. Where were they hurrying? To what distant shores and oceans?

Yellow spots clashed in the water and broke into fragments. Small black crabs sat in the cracks of the rock and gnawed at fish scales. The crabs were afraid of everything, even the birds' shadows.

Sometimes Valentina Grigorievna would accompany Spinney to her rock. Spinney showed her the shell. It lay deep on the bottom, and nobody had been able to dive down far enough and bring it up. Valentina Grigorievna tried diving to get it. She came up pale as a sheet and sat gasping for a long time. And for even longer circles swam before her eyes, curving into spirals like the shell's lime body.

Valentina Grigorievna did not interfere in Spinney's war against the boys. She only asked her: "Please, leave Sandbag alone in the water. He's been punished enough."

Once she inquired: "How did the war start? "

Spinney answered: "I don't know. Simply they're all vile beasts. They make me sick."

Valentina Grigorievna laughed.

* * *

One evening a delegation came to Spinney's house. It consisted of the school drama group, complete with the director.

The girls were walking ahead. They were in a state of extreme agitation and kept straightening the folds of their skirts and making curtseys. The boys had pulled in their stomachs, which were

lean enough without it. Nobody had his hands in his pockets, and so their hands seemed to be conspicuously in the way. The old actor kept emitting small coughs.

Sergei and Natasha were playing in the yard. They were the first to see the smart delegation. And they were the first to ask the question: "Who are you looking for? "

"We want to see the actress," the girls said in voices squeaky with awe.

Sergei and Natasha exchanged glances, joined hands and shrugged their shoulders: "What actress? "

"Well," the girls hesitated. Then one of them, wearing a blue kerchief on her head who played Klara the Crow in "The Snow Queen" said: "She has brown hair. Kind of fluffy. And grey eyes. Very big."

"Aha," Sergei and Natasha nodded, threw their heads back and shouted: "Valentina Grigorievna! "

Valentina Grigorievna looked out of her window.

"There's a crowd of people to see you! " Sergei and Natasha yelled. Valentina Grigorievna came down and asked in dismay: "Do you really want to see me?"

"Really," the girl in the blue kerchief answered for all of them.

The boys in the back stood on tiptoe to see the actress better. The director was smiling shyly. His clean white fingers trembled.

"We have come to ask you to attend the dress rehearsal of our drama group," Klara the Crow

announced, flushed with the consciousness of her own daring. "It will be an honour to have a famous actress... we'll be very glad. Please, don't say no."

Valentina Grigorievna smiled crookedly. She seemed lost.

"But who told you I'm an actress? "

"We know. No need to conceal it from us," the amateur actors cried in jolly unison.

"But I can't.... It's a misunderstanding...."

Seeing that they were getting into a quandary, the old actor hastened to the help of his young charges. He made a discreet bow and began: "Dear colleague. I left the stage twenty years ago. Things have changed since. You may have personal reasons to conceal your name. But the request of children has always been sacred for an actor. Even Vassily Ivanovich Kachalov with whom I had the honour to appear...."

"It's a misunderstanding," Valentina Grigorievna interrupted him. "I am not at all an actress. I'd enjoy very much attending your dress rehearsal. But I assure you that I have nothing to do with the theatre. I'm simply an engineer. A specialist in printed cottons." She stumbled on the word "specialist" and gave the director a frightened glance from her grey eyes. "I ... can show you my documents, if you like ... I'm sorry...."

"She's sorry," Sergei and Natasha put in. "Forgive her, please."

A sudden quiet descended. The schoolchildren seemed to have stopped breathing. Then the

silence gave way to the boys' mocking snorts and the girls' indignant whispers.

The old actor blinked disconcertedly and, pressing his hands to his chest in a theatrical gesture, exclaimed, "Please excuse us, Madam! "

He gave a forced laugh, trying to turn the whole incident into a joke. The drama group did not support him. They had been outraged.

Valentina Grigorievna gave a dry bow and hurried back to her room.

The Snow Queen raised her eyebrows haughtily.

"Didn't I tell you she was not glamorous enough for an actress? "

"I think she's too glamorous for an actress," replied Karl the Raven. "It's a good thing actually that she's not an actress."

The old actor stared at the steps which Valentina Grigorievna had just mounted. "Beauty knows no bounds," he said softly.

"Humiliating ourselves all for nothing," one of the Robbers snorted.

The amateur actors were looking at one another resentfully.

"Just let me get my hands on that Spinney," the Snow Queen said.

"Here I am."

Spinney was sitting on the suspension staircase. The light leaves of a damson concealed her from view.

"Fools deserve to be fooled," she said, and added, glancing at the old actor, "I don't mean you, of course."

"Thank you," the old actor bowed, turned and strode off.

"You're a pain in the neck," the Snow Queen shouted.

One of the boys threw a chip of wood at Spinney. Karl the Raven laughed again.

"Let's go," he said.

"Let's," the others agreed. They made off, the girls looking back now and then and staring at Spinney, their eyes screwed up, some with spite, others with puzzlement.

Spinney felt sad. She gazed into a window-pane for a long time. The reflection in the pane swam and looked like an old faded photograph. Spinney was winding her short springy curls on a finger and thinking: "If I had hair like Valentina Grigorievna's no boy would dare to throw a chip at me."

Her reflection swayed. It was the wind swinging the window-frame. But Spinney had time to notice the reflection of Valentina Grigorievna behind her. She turned her head.

Valentina Grigorievna sat down on a bench. She held a book in her hands but she was not reading.

Spinney was about to go down to her, when the old actor re-appeared from the bushes.

"He wants to apologise," Spinney decided.

The old man lowered himself on one knee before Valentina Grigorievna, pressed his hands to his chest and began to speak.

Spinney heard: "I'm staggered. It's like a visitation. I feel born anew because I have seen a miracle. You are a miracle...."

The old actor rose impetuously, and Spinney imagined she could hear his joints creaking like an old chair.

"God! " Spinney heard somebody say quite near her. She looked down. Beneath the suspension staircase, leaning his back against the damson tree, stood the father of Sergei and Natasha.

"Exquisite," he whispered. "Look, Spinney. Listen. The orchestra will start up in a minute."

Valentina Grigorievna sat in confusion and completely at a loss for something to say. The actor was telling her something, tossing his light hair back now and again.

Spinney put two fingers into her mouth. The whistle was as sharp as the snap of a whip.

"Bravo," Sergei and Natasha's father said loudly.

Spinney jumped down from the staircase and walked across the yard with a defiant air. Glancing back at the gate, she saw that Valentina Grigorievna and the distressed old actor had been joined by Pyotr Petrovich.

Spinney walked along the upper highway. Blue puddles glittered ahead, reflecting the sky and the trees. When she came nearer, the puddles evaporated and new ones appeared in the distance. They seemed to be flowing along the road. Blue glittering puddles.

Spinney went up into the hills and wandered there a long time. In the evening, as she was sitting on the embankment parapet, somebody touched her on the shoulder.

The old actor stood before her.

"Listen," he said. "There's something I must tell you."

Spinney gave him a defiant smile and dangled her legs.

"Please, apologise to Valentina Grigorievna for me...."

"Can't you do it yourself? "

"I can't," the old actor said sternly. "I will do it some other time. And don't you give yourself airs...." He paused, then continued gently, almost tenderly.

"It may be a good thing that you don't know how to forgive. But unforgiveness hardens the heart. I don't know what is worse, to be too soft or too hard. I know what you think about me. I don't mind. If a person falls and then rises high, he will be judged by the latter...."

He did not put his hand on Spinney's head, as he had been wont to do. He said simply, "Good night, my girl." Then he crossed over to the other side of the embankment where the crowds milled and the shop windows spread yellow electric carpets on the pavements. And again Spinney fancied strings were humming under his jacket.

That night Spinney raided the Teachers' Sanatorium and picked a handful of carnations.

She climbed the creaky cornices and the rusty drain-pipe and sat down on Valentina Grigorievna's window-sill. To her frightened question, "Who's there? " she answered calmly: "It's me, Spinney. I've brought you some carnations."

Valentina Grigorievna sat up in her bed and asked sadly: "Why is art so ... implacable? Why is it so painful to be exposed as an outsider? "

"It was I who invented the story that you were an actress."

"Why? "

"I don't know. Please forgive me."

Valentina Grigorievna took the carnations and put them in a glass of water.

"Why do you bring me flowers? "

"I know that," Spinney answered. "Because I love you."

Valentina Grigorievna leaned back against the wall.

"What for? " she asked in a low voice. "I have done nothing special.... I can understand girls getting a crush on film stars, not loving the actual people but their fame. But why love me? "

"You are beautiful. Granny called you Rainbow."

Valentina Grigorievna sat down beside her on the window-sill, her legs dangling and her back slightly stooped.

"Granny asked me if I had fallen in love with some boy," Spinney continued, watching the neon lights of sign-boards and advertisements scintillate on the seaboard boulevard. "As if I were that silly! You know, sometimes I feel a kind of lump rising here. I almost choke, I love everybody so much. I'm ready to hug everybody, I want to hug them until they cry with pain. I feel I'd like to lift up the whole globe in my hands and carry it nearer to the sun so that people could warm up and become kind and beautiful. It

frightens me.... Can one give so much love to just one person? That person would never be able to bear its weight.... And sometimes I hate everybody."

She fell silent. She fancied that the silence would be shattered the next moment by somebody's loud mocking guffaw. After a while she became reassured and the silence seemed filled with understanding eyes.

"Tell me about the father of those twins," Valentina Grigorievna said.

A vague alarm touched Spinney's heart. She shrank.

"Why? " she asked.

"No particular reason. I like him."

"He's a funny one. He goes swimming at night. His wife is dead. Why d'you want to know? He smells of tobacco."

Valentina Grigorievna was gazing over the cedar tops at the sea across which lay a ripply moon-track.

"How beautiful," she whispered.

"Beautiful," Spinney responded, and it suddenly occurred to her that she felt indifferent to the sea and the mountains which had become as dull and dead to her as the views on the souvenir post-cards. She decided it was time she went home. She walked the length of the cornice, slid down the drain-pipe to the one below, scratching her stomach on some wiring wound on the pipe, and from the other cornice made her way to the suspension staircase.

She knew quite a few things about Pyotr Petrovich, the father of the twins. She used to be

as much in awe of him as of her headmaster. Now she developed a deadly hostility towards him.

He was going to spend two months by the sea because he had not had any leave last year. He was not very good at enjoying himself. He played chess with himself. He went fishing with the artel fishermen, leaving Sergei and Natasha in the care of the neighbours sometimes for as long as three days. It was he who gave the homeless mongrel the name of Kaiser Wilhelm Ferdinand the Third. When he met an acquaintance in town, he said, "Lend me a hundred rubles, will you? I'll pay you back in Leningrad."

The acquaintances made lame excuses and shrugged their shoulders expressively. Soon they stopped greeting him, crossing to the other side of the street or hiding in the gateways at the sight of him. And so he went about with his kids or by himself, went off into the sea with the fishermen and seemed quite content.

The next morning Sergei and Natasha climbed through Spinney's window.

"What does it mean, Spinney, Fierce Panther? " they asked.

"It's an animal like a tiger," Spinney answered sleepily.

Sergei and Natasha examined her carefully, even felt the tips of her fingers and asked:

"Why did Daddy call you Panther then? "

Spinney jumped up.

"Your Daddy is a swine! "

The twins frowned and started climbing back through the window.

"And he's worse than any tiger himself! " Spinney shouted after them, leaning out of the window.

Valentina Grigorievna and Pyotr Petrovich stood talking in the yard. Spinney's heart sank. She was about to shout, "Don't go to the beach with him! " She wanted to ask, "Wasn't it lovely, just you and me? " But she banged the window shut instead.

"I won't go to the beach today," she thought to herself. "I'm not going to force myself on her. If she prefers that character.... I'll put on my boots and go into the mountains."

However, instead of the boots, she put on rubber swimming shoes, put a fringed Abkhazian felt hat on her head, donned her best sun-frock and ran off to the beach.

Two grown-ups and two small kids were playing volley-ball by the water's edge.

Valentina Grigorievna smiled when she saw Spinney and tossed her the ball. "Here, Spinney! "

Spinney kicked the ball with all her strength. The ball flew into the water and bobbed by the beach.

"Panther," Sergei said and ran into the water to retrieve the ball throwing Spinney an angry look.

"Panther," said Natasha.

Spinney took off her sun-dress, entered the water and started swimming, diving now and again. She swam out very far.

From the beach came a hum of voices and laughter that sounded like the flapping of wings.

Somebody was squealing delightedly. Spinney made a face and floated on her back, her arms thrown out.

The water covered her ears with great soft palms. The huge sky was sparkling so brightly the eyes couldn't stand the glare. Spinney closed her eyes, then suddenly turned back up and made for the shore at a fast crawl.

Among the people bathing nearer the shore she spied out the man with eyes as dark as Sergei's and Natasha's.

"Just you wait! "

She dived, seized him by the legs, gave him a jerk and then climbed onto his shoulders. "I'll show you! "

Pyotr Petrovich gripped her hands and started sinking. He went down and down, looking Spinney straight into the eyes. He seemed to be grinning and saying:

"D'you like it underwater? "

"Let me go! What d'you want? " Spinney was yelling silently. She'd had no time to take a breath of air before he pulled her under water. She was in a bad fix now. And Pyotr Petrovich was winking at her mockingly: "What's the hurry? Let's stay here some more."

"Let go!!!"

The sun was swimming overhead like so many yellow swaying scarves. The sea weed tickled Spinney's legs. A resilient pressure was squeezing her temples. Her neck quivered. Spinney remembered Sandbag's face when he was drowning beside his inflated ring. She was

on the point of opening her mouth and shouting under water.

Pyotr Petrovich let a big bubble out of his mouth. The bubble raced up, followed by smaller bubbles. Spinney made after them. Her hands had been freed. Quicker! Quicker! When she finally took a gulp of air, she went on beating the water frenziedly, as though wanting to jump out. The sky was spinning. The mountains were spinning. Nearby a man surfaced. He looked at her with commiseration and smoothed his hair.

Spinney gave a sob, turned away and swam towards her rock. She climbed out of the water and collapsed on the rock, gasping. She had no strength left to think or to move. She might have gone to sleep like that. Suddenly she heard a rustle behind her. She jumped up and saw the gloating faces of the boys who had made an ambush for her here and were going to take their revenge for all the wrongs she had done them.

The rock was tall, the water was far below, and she could not possibly take a dive with jagged rocks sticking out all around.

"Got you, Panther! " the boys were shouting. The last to scramble up the rock wall, his inflated ring clutched in his hand, was fat Sandbag. He shouted, between gasps: "We'll give it to you, won't we just! "

Fists hammered on Spinney. Sandbag did not hit her, he just kept saying: "I'd love to let you have it, but my blow would kill you."

In the end, he pushed the boys away from her, helped her to rise and said good-naturedly:

"Now, own up that you've lost. Promise you won't make us drink your mineral water and then we'll conclude peace. Otherwise we'll give you some more! "

"Yes I will! " Spinney shouted. "You'll drink plenty of mineral water yet. It makes me laugh just to look at you! "

She stepped up to the edge and dived down.

"She'll kill herself! " Sandbag shouted.

The boys ran up to the edge. They saw Spinney clear the charp rocks and make a clean dive, almost without any spray. They swallowed enviously and expressed their admiration in an honest moan: "An ace! "

Sandbag seized his ring, took a run and jumped down, feet first. The water lashed at his bent knees, hit him in the chin and tore the ring out of his fingers.

When Sandbag surfaced he saw the boys doing a wild dance on the rock. They cheered him with delighted yells. The ring was bobbing nearby, the air escaping out of a tear with a bubbling sound that was like a farewell. Spinney was swimming beside him. Her eyes were frightened and surprised.

Sandbag looked away, sick at heart, and prepared to drown. Suddenly, without noticing how, he found himself swimming to the rock. The skill, so suddenly acquired, did not last him long. He was slowly sinking down.

"Take in as much air as you can and dive," he heard Spinney's voice beside him. "Don't be afraid, I'll help you."

Sandbag found that swimming under the water was an easier business. He would come up, take a gulp of air and go down again. The rock was nearer each time he opened his eyes.

Spinney was swimming beside and finally pulled the exhausted Sandbag out of the water onto a ledge.

A brown stomach flew past overhead. Then another, and another. The boys were diving from the rock.

"There's a pretty shell on the bottom here," Spinney said.

"If I could swim well I'd get it... for you," Sandbag said.

"It's very deep below. One can't dive that deep."

The boys were crawling out onto the ledge.

"Good for Sandbag! " they shouted. "Good for us all! "

"You must take a stone," said Sandbag. "Then you'll dive deep."

* * *

In the afternoon Spinney knocked on Valentina Grigorievna's door.

"Here," she said, putting a huge wet shell on the window-sill. "That same shell. I dived for it with a stone. It's easy with a stone. It's a present for you. Something to remember me by."

Valentina Grigorievna wanted to hug Spinney, but the girl slipped out of her arms and ran off.

* * *

Spinney was sitting under the stairs on some rugs hung out on the railings to dry. The dog was lying at her feet. The dog was looking into her face, wet with tears, and could not imagine why anyone should cry if he isn't hungry, if nobody has hit him with a stick, kicked him or run over his tail with a heavy wheel.

That afternoon Spinney had gone to the market to buy some fish for supper. When she returned she saw Sergei and Natasha squatting on the ground under Valentina Grigorievna's window and collecting bits of shell. It was Spinney's shell. The drama group director, Snow Queen, Karl the Raven, Clara the Crow and Pyotr Petrovich, all extremely put out, were looking down from Valentina Grigorievna's window.

"They have invited us all to see the play," Sergei said.

Spinney's lips were trembling.

"They say it's a pity you won't be in it. They say you're good," said Natasha.

Spinney heard heels tapping on the staircase. Valentina Grigorievna was coming down.

Sergei and Natasha picked up all the shell fragments and stood with their backs to each other, preparing to bawl.

Spinney put the bag with the fish in the window of her room and ran away. She heard Valentina Grigorievna shouting after her:

"Spinney, come back, Spinney! He didn't mean to...."

"Him," Spinney thought, "him again...."

It was evening now, and Spinney was hiding under the staircase. The walls were mouldy. Dry flies swayed in old cobwebs. Mice walked about sedately. The dog Willie spent his nights here.

"See how it is, Willie," Spinney mumbled. "You know it all. I don't have to explain to you."

The dog closed his eyes. He had purple lids and a wrinkled old woman's nose.

"She is so beautiful, and he...," Spinney said with a sigh.

The dog sighed too. If he could think in human categories he might have been able to understand the meaning of the word "beautiful".

"What does she see in him? " Spinney shouted. "He's ugly. He mocks at people. He's a heartless crocodile. You don't understand a thing about people, Willie."

The dog put his muzzle on his front paws. Spinney tickled him behind the ear, ruffled the fur on his back and crawled out into the yard.

She climbed the stairs, walked the length of a cornice, scrambled up the drain-pipe, walked along another cornice, sat down on the familiar window-sill and called softly: "Are you asleep, Valentina Grigorievna? "

"Come here," came from inside the room.

Spinney did not budge an inch.

"Are you in love with him? " she asked.

"Spinney! "

"He's a scoundrel. He's had five wives. He poisoned the sixth with kerosene. He robbed a bank. He wants to defect to Turkey."

"How dare you, Spinney! "

"I dare alright. He's a heel."

Valentina Grigorievna sat up in her bed.

"Go away," she said firmly. "I don't want to see you."

Spinney sat there breathing heavily, then shouted:

"And you're no better ... I know things about you too. You're like everybody else! "

A storm had passed somewhere by the Turkish shore. It had rocked the sea so hard that here, on the opposite side, the waves were climbing one another, lashing out with white manes. They collapsed on the shore like slain bulls and crawled back, roaring.

The wind had driven the bathers away from the beach. Big ships rose over the pier as though trying to sit down on its concrete for a rest. Launches and fishing boats danced by their moorings and seemed to be on the point of starting a game of hopscotch.

The embankment parapet was wet with spray. Bits of foam flew as far as the shop-windows on the other side. Sea-gulls had ousted the fat pigeons from their perches on house roofs.

Spinney was lying on the beach all alone. She knew a secret. If you dived under the first, most frenzied wave and waited underwater, working with your arms frantically until the second wave passed over you, the backwash would carry you out into the sea. And you could then swim along,

tossed up high on wave crests. The sky would rock overhead and the shore would come into view and disappear from sight. The people on the shore would wave their arms and say isn't she a crazy kid, but their tone would be that of admiration and envy.

Spinney was thinking all these thoughts to no particular purpose. She did not want to delight or amaze anybody. She fancied the sea was thrashing about so wildly especially to calm and comfort her. It was beautiful. It was so beautiful that all her troubles and sad thoughts seemed to have lost their meaning. She suddenly felt free of all that had been shackling her these last days.

Spinney heard voices. She turned round to tell people, "Look how beautiful is the sea."

Valentina Grigorievna, Pyotr Petrovich, Sergei, Natasha, the old actor and Spinney's grandmother were walking along the beach.

"What d'you want of me? " Spinney whispered. She suddenly felt unbearably alone and afraid and backed towards the waves.

"Spinney! " Valentina Grigorievna shouted.

Spinney ran after a retreating wave and dived under the next one, huge, foaming, its crest curved towards her. The wave turned her around, crushed her underneath it and dragged her along the bottom, over slippery pebbles, and then the backwash caught her up and carried her into the sea.

Spinney did not hear the screams. She swam forward slowly, now rising, now slipping down from the gently sloping back of the wave.

Suddenly she saw a man's head nearby. He smiled at her with his dark eyes and shouted, "Nice weather, isn't it? "

He swam up to Spinney and said: "We mustn't go back. We won't manage without ropes."

His meaning was clear to her. When the swell is very strong it is impossible to break free of the sea. The waves will drag you along the pebbles and carry you off back into the sea. It only seems to those on the shore that all the waves roll towards land.

Spinney swam to her rock. The man swam alongside casting thoughtful glances at her now and then. When they neared the rock, he moved ahead of her.

A wave pressed him to the rock, then dragged him away from it. But he held onto a crack fast, catching Spinney with his other hand.

The wave fell back, revealing sea-weed on the rocks. But another was coming along.

The man helped Spinney up to a ledge and held to his crack with all his might. The wave passed over his head.

They were climbing up, Spinney in the lead, Pyotr Petrovich following her. They could see the beach from the top. It was not far away. Some 300 metres. People were running back and forth there. Pyotr Petrovich waved to them. They waved in response and shouted something.

"They're thanking you for saving my life," Spinney said with a crooked smile and thought to herself: "Perhaps he really has saved my life? "

Spinney sat down on a stone. The wind threw cold spray into her chest.

Far away on the horizon the waves seemed enormous, much bigger than below, at the foot of the rock. They swelled out unexpectedly, and Spinney had the feeling the rock was moving to meet them. She felt a little dizzy.

"The sky is so blue," she thought. "And the sea is black-and-green. And the sea-gulls disappear when they get near the sun, as though they evaporate on touching it."

Pyotr Petrovich sat down beside her.

"I expect they'll send a launch to pick us up. A white launch. Are you cold? Take my jacket, will you? "

"But you have no jacket," Spinney said.

' "Never mind," the man said. "You imagine that I've given you my jacket, then you'll feel warmer."

"Very well," said Spinney with a smile. "Only it's a little wet."

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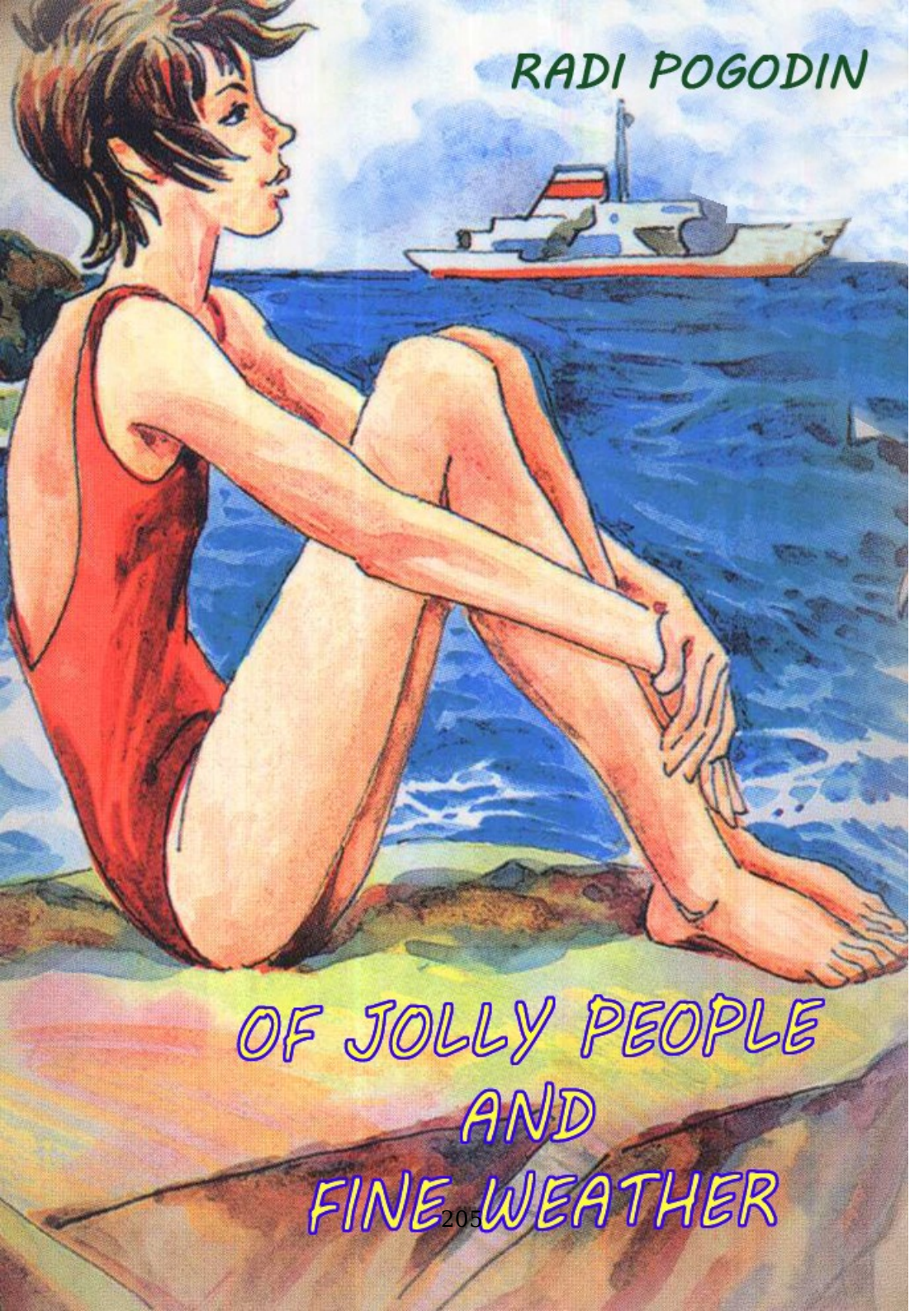

OF JOLLY PEOPLE AND FINE WEATHER

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